



SAMVIT

[Knowledge that leads to enlightenment]



Sri Sarada Math, Dakshineswar, Calcutta-700 076
No. 10, September 1984

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SAMVIT

म नो बुद्ध्या शुभया संयुज्जतु ।

May He endow us with good thoughts.

Shvetashvatara Upanishad III 4

Universal Prayers

वयं धा ते त्वे इद्विन्द्र विप्रा अपि षमसि ।

नहि त्वदन्यः पुरुहूत कषचन मधवन्मस्ति मङ्गिता ॥

Verily God, we are Thine; we worshippers depend on Thee. O Munificent One, who are invoked by many, there is none but Thee to show us grace.

Rig Veda VIII.lxvi.13.

● ● ●
अग्ने व्रतपते व्रतं चरिष्यामि तच्छ्रेयं
तन्मे राक्षताम् । इदमहमवृतात्सत्यमुपैमि ॥

O Thou Shining God, O Lord of vows, I shall keep my vow. Grant that I may be able to do so. Grant that it may be fulfilled. May it lead me from falsehood to the Truth.

Shukla Yajur Veda I.5.

REFLECTIONS

The Holy Mother's Challenge to Modern Women

THE PRIVILEGED distinction of modern women today is the broad platform of liberty that they have won. Political, economic, social and religious—in these main currents of life women are more free than ever before to work and build up their own lives. But having acquired this unrestrained freedom of movement it is imperative for them to pause and ask themselves the fundamental question—What is it that they want? Lecomte du Nouy said: 'Liberty is not only a privilege, but a test.' And when modern women understand the correlation between liberty and the test it provides they will be able to fulfil the great promise that the future holds before them; they will evolve a more perfect life, instead of regressing as they are now in danger of doing.

What is 'a more perfect life'? A Sanskrit poet says: 'Food, sleep, fear and co-habitation are common to human beings and animals. Only dharma distinguishes the former from the latter'. Dharma alone has been woman's friend in her life's struggle. Even when she had no freedom in the world her sure footing was on the solid ground of dharma. In peace and prosperity, in calamity and distress, she remained steady because her dharma sustained her. This word, derived from the root *dhri* to uphold, means in its most comprehensive sense, the moral law that upholds life. It includes the cultivation of such virtues as non-injury, truthfulness, forbearance, generosity, purity and so on. These virtues brought to her contentment and harmony, stability and security, aspiration and worship—in short, all that went to enrich life.

Unfortunately, today dharma is understood only as the observance of certain rites, the form and practice of which have lost their meaning. The result is that thinking modern women reject the support of dharma altogether, but they have found no substitute for it. Education may have sharpened their wits and made their intellect penetrative, but it has made them lose warmth, the feelings of the heart and the sentiments of universal love and generosity.

The Holy Mother challenges modern women. Let not the sophisticated city-dwellers look askance at Sri Sarada Devi, the simple

village woman. True, she led no social or political movement; no academic honour adorned her nor did acts of martyrdom hallow her saintliness, yet she achieved the goal of human life, perfection. According to the Hindu Shastras attaining perfection would mean achieving liberation through any work assigned to her according to her status and so on. Outwardly the Holy Mother was only a poor, illiterate woman who spent most of her time in her village homes at Kamarpukur and Jayrambati, or in the untenable music tower of the Dakshineswar Kali temple, or in the terrace-room of the garden house at Cossipore. Her face was covered with a veil, she spoke in whispers, she was always busy with the ordinary duties of her strange household, and people rarely saw her. Her daily life was uneventful but it is precisely in her day-to-day life that may be seen that inner force which challenges other women to follow her. A few well known events in her life will show that it is not important to consider *what* she did, but *how* she did it; how her attitude toward life allowed her spirit to blossom and perfect itself.

Charity : Another's Due

When Sarada was ten years old a bad year set in. Hundreds of famine-stricken people used to come to her father's door for a handful of *khichuri*. Pot after pot was emptied and fresh *khichuri* cooked. But the steaming hot food could not be eaten quickly and the hungry were impatient. Little Sarada could not bear to see the agony of the starving people. She would untiringly fan the *khichuri* to cool it so that they could eat it up quickly.

Such simple duties of daily life which in ordinary households many young girls would do are soon forgotten. But this pathetic scene left an indelible impression on Sarada Devi's compassionate mind. Never in the future could she stand seeing anyone hungry. Remembering the starved and miserable faces of those poor people she would later say: 'Is it a joke to bear the agony of an empty stomach?' Years after, in her Calcutta house, all were resting in the afternoon. A beggar came and asked for alms. The monks who lived with her shouted, 'Go away! Don't disturb us now.' At these words Mother was piqued and exclaimed to her companions: 'Have you heard their remark? They have driven away the poor man. They could not shake off their lethargy and give something to the beggar. He only wanted a handful of rice. And they could not take the trouble to do this bit of service. Is it

proper to deprive a man of what is his due?' This kindness of hers extended also to animals. She said once: 'Even to the cow we owe these vegetable peelings. We should hold them near her mouth.'

These days we talk of fraternity. But how many of us feel for others and give in charity considering it as *another's due*?

Fortitude without Bitterness

In the Holy Mother compassion was combined with rare fortitude. The adverse circumstances into which she often fell, and the patience and faith with which she suffered them, prove this. A wife's rightful place is by the side of her husband. But destiny had chosen otherwise for Sri Sarada Devi. She was in Jayrambati and her husband was far away in Dakshineswar. People said he had become mad. In her small village it was difficult for her to move about without criticism. She used to stay indoors, for on seeing her people would blurt out, 'Dear me, Shyama's daughter has been married to a lunatic'. To the young, hopeful wife this was the hardest blow. Her anxious thoughts, however, remained locked up within her own mind and silently she bore the ridicule. But courage did not fail her. When an opportunity presented itself she went to Dakshineswar, though she was not invited to go, and she went with the determination that even if her husband were really mad she would stay there to care for him.

In this instance, however, she had the hope of living with her Master to give her courage and strength. But after his death, destiny dealt her a harder blow. On return from a pilgrimage she settled in Kamarpukur. A poor, helpless widow, alone and unaided. She had not even money to buy salt! And the village women were again critical. She had received her Master's command not to give up her bracelets and her red-bordered cloth, as a widow is supposed to do. She had therefore to face public criticism. She withstood everything patiently for she was completely resigned to the Divine Will. There was no complaint, no bitterness. Not even her mother, who lived in Jayrambati three miles away, knew of her hardships. In this is seen exemplary reticence, resignation and fortitude!

In speech she was always courteous. When in later days she had to put up with the perversities of her mad sister-in-law and the obstinacy of her niece, Radhu, she never said a rude word to them but prayed to God to forgive them. On the other hand, when someone in Jayrambati spoke harshly to her mad sister-in-law, she said: 'One should

not hurt others even by words. One must not speak even an unpleasant truth unnecessarily'.

Purity Is Not Passive

The story of the Holy Mother's purity is wonderful. At the young age of nineteen, in the full bloom of youth, she was united with her husband. He asked her, 'Do you want to drag me down into *maya*?' Her answer was: 'Why should I do that? I have come only to help you in your dharma.' Her husband offered her a tribute with the words: 'Had she not been so pure who knows if my self-control would not have broken down and body-consciousness arisen?'

Though the Holy Mother believed in observing the rules of external purity in daily life she had no obsessions in this matter. She insisted, however, on internal purification. 'The mind is everything. It is in the mind alone that one feels pure and impure.' While leading an austere life at Dakshineswar she used to pray to the Lord, looking up at the moon, 'Oh Lord, there is a stain in the moon, but let there not be the least trace of stain in my mind'. Thus she showed by her own example that purity is not a passive virtue but something to strive for.

Love Is a Heroic Virtue

The Holy Mother's all-embracing motherly love is worth recording. She did not deliver lectures on the virtues of equality and tolerance; she practised them. Take for instance the case of Amzad. He was one of the labourers constructing her house at Jayrambati. One day the Holy Mother invited him to eat in her house; she served him food herself and washed the place where he had eaten. When her niece, Nalini, objected, she firmly replied: 'Keep quiet. He is my son exactly in the sense that Sarat is.' To her both were the same; a monk, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and her devotee who served her with undivided devotion in her last days, and, the Muslim labourer who had been a dacoit. No class distinction held her back. Her only concern was that he should eat with satisfaction. She reproached her niece who threw food at him from a distance saying, 'If you serve a person in this way, can he eat with relish?'

Behind this attitude is not only love and consideration, but there is a conscious acceptance of a moral principle, namely, to establish human dignity by seeing the Immanent in all.

Another instance of her charity is still more striking. The world usually passes harsh judgement on a woman who has sinned and

closes all doors of mercy on her. The Holy Mother's love surpassed this standard of morality of the world. Where she saw sincere repentance or an honest effort to be good, she always gave encouragement and help. At one time a certain woman of a good family who had gone astray repented and came to ask for her grace. The Mother was kind to her and even initiated her. An influential devotee objected to the presence of this woman and went to the extent of saying that she would not go to the mother's house till the woman stopped frequenting it. The Holy Mother paid no heed to her and said that she was equally the mother of the *good* and the *bad*. This answer is an eye-opener to those who are unkind to their unfortunate sisters.

Instances like these which reflect the light of her enlightened heart show that greatness lies not in doing some big work but in performing even small acts with perfection. Such acts bring about a harmonious blending of all the forces of life and contribute something permanent to human progress.

Today, when in the world the fire of intolerance and selfishness is raging wild, the Holy Mother's last message of universal goodwill is worth remembering. 'If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; this whole world is your own.'

In society women have to play the part of peace-makers, of pacifiers. It is a shame that in all spheres of life it is said that women are responsible for creating disharmony, that women are foolish and selfish. It is a myth; let women prove it. Selflessness and endurance are natural to them. It is they who can fight the miseries of the world 'with a mother's heart and a hero's will' and establish peace on earth.

Let it not be said that the Holy Mother's teachings are not for ordinary women, she was a spiritual giant while others are not. Like the sun's rays that fall equally on the peasant's cottage or the prince's palace her teachings are for one and all. So let women follow her, and give up all small thoughts. Let them forego their selfish ends, take refuge in her and hearken to the words:

All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!

Francis Thompson

Vedic Vision and Modern Science

JEANINE MILLER

FOR VEDIC man the sacrificial ritual which was a vital part of his religious life was the symbolic re-enactment of the universal process of creation, the eternal rhythm of give and take, the circuit of offering, taking, and returning the gift, embodying in itself the idea of the descent of the spiritual life into the limitations of the material but to re-ascend enriched by the experience. In this dramatic re-enactment there was built up an intimate relationship between terrestrial man and those divine agencies which man invoked as a co-participator in the divine drama, an interaction that mirrored the interplay between spirit and matter, heaven and earth, the eternal rhythm of the cosmic order. We can learn a great deal even from what may appear an archaic symbol.

Human Integrity

The vision of cosmic integrity, of which human integrity is the mirror, is peculiar to the Vedas and was more or less lost sight of in subsequent ages when man alone became the proper study of mankind; his cosmic background and, indeed, his very essence faded out of view.

But more than this vision of cosmic integrity and man's place therein, the Vedas hold hidden within their invocations and their praises of the many colourful gods, certain profound secrets of the human soul which have only recently aroused the interest of western man and caused him to embark upon further research with all the apparatus of modern science. They concern certain powers such as extra-sensory perception, divination, seership or clairvoyance, and such powers latent in man which were already cultivated and were to be tabulated in the science of yoga which itself, in its lower form, *Hatha Yoga*, has only in the past fifty years become accepted as worthy of study and practice. The Vedas grant glimpses into the more recondite aspects of the psyche, and thereby offer a great field of research for any Jungian psychologist, for Jung provided a key of inestimable value which itself, in probing the depths of the unconscious, could fathom out some of the more

Jeanine Miller is a research assistant in the British Museum. Among her published works are *The Vedas, Harmony, Meditation, Fulfilment* and a translation of the *Isha Upanishad* and others. Another article of hers was published in *Samvit* No. 4, September 1981 under the title 'The Relevance of the Vedas to Modern Man'.

obscure hints scattered throughout the Vedic collections. The science of colour and sound and their interaction is nowadays slowly being rediscovered; a study of the Vedas reveals the knowledge of the Rishis as to the effect of vibrations on states of consciousness and how to use specific vibrations embodied in word-sounds and their rhythm in order to communicate with the *devas*, hence the knowledge of the language of the gods. Some of the Sanskrit words themselves give a clue to this: e.g., to 'sing' (*archa*), meant also to 'shine', so that in praising their gods from the depth of their heart the bards were not only 'voicing' but also 'shining forth' their devotion. 'Sun-eyed' and 'flame-tongued' like the gods, such are the 'inspired' poets, the bards of the Vedas. The science of sound, of *mantras*, of the power of the word, of vibrations, known in ancient India, has many surprises for us today, and may be of incalculable help in our psychological development.

Nature constantly transforms her pageant of lives, like her child Psyche, her own projection; the very law underlying the cosmic order cannot allow anything to remain petrified in old forms; for this means death. That is why we cannot go back to the ancient gods, the ancient forms of rituals, the ancient moulds. The mere idea would mean clinging to the forms of the past which must perforce fall away, like leaves from a tree, whereas the vital point in our evolution is the psyche that produced those forms and that is throbbing within us, *here* and *now*. That which in us ever creates from its ever living archetypal groundwork will mould new images more appropriate to the time, thus freeing itself from the old hold of past crystallized forms.

But we can learn a great deal from the ancient mind, for that mind is still ours though we have sunk it deep behind our conceptual outlook; it is still the throbbing basis of our mind. We can learn from the ancient projections, the ancient modes of conceiving and approaching life, and, above all, from the Vedic all-comprehensive and dynamic vision. Herein lies the Vedas' fundamental relevance to modern man, and their great lesson: that we are not only a link among many others, but a vital, creative factor in the vast cosmic drama, capable of playing, and, indeed, called upon to play, a dynamic part in the world towards the building up of all into one harmonious whole; as in the heavens so on earth. Therefore we are not to divorce ourselves, as we have done far too much, from our roots which lie embedded in a living fountain-source, our own psyche—there where our bond with Nature is at its

strongest—for through the millennia Psyche has grown, nurtured by those divine principles which are themselves the fashioners of Nature, and which Psyche projected and anthropomorphized into the figures of the gods in order to cultivate that feeling of solidarity with Nature and all her creatures including humankind, and hence to cultivate respect for and love of her varied forms and a realization of her livingness and sacredness. All of this the child still experiences, until that experience gets atrophied through 'education'. Such solidarity is itself the great teacher of the oneness of all life, the interlinkedness of all creatures.

Therefore we are not to exploit Nature for baser selfish ends but, in obeying her laws, to become her real cherished lords and learn to marshal her resources for the good of the whole—all her children—and not for the base profit of the crafty few. Therefore we are to develop a civilization where man's innate, creative faculties can blossom forth in concordance with his environment and with those great principles that govern harmony, and not to the detriment of his own inner being as well as that of his great fostering Mother—Nature. We are to develop a civilization where man himself can consciously and freely enter into full communion with those same divine principles responsible for all the forms of beauty in this world, and be inspired therefrom.

Eternal Nourishment

This is the essence of the message which modern man can reap from the Vedas. This message, as alive today as ever it was, vibrates with light and hope. It greets us, across the gulf of thousands of years, with the sunshine of eternal youth and vigour, strong in its everlasting truth. It gives purpose and a goal to human life, leaving with us the vision that all things move in accordance with the divine ordinances of the cosmic order which even man, the disruptor par excellence, has in the long run to turn back to, a harmony which our modern distressed world sorely needs to take as a mirror on which to model, act, and rejuvenate itself, and go forward invigorated, as the original Aryans did, on the path of the Eternal.

The unrest and the widely spread dissatisfaction, so outstanding in a world that has prided itself on its material values, are pointers to the fact that man needs a comprehensive ideal that gives him a key to the understanding of the universe, of himself, and of his place in the world. He needs an ideal that gives him a meaningful purpose and the means of achieving that purpose, that inspires and uplifts him.

This the Vedas provide. As Jung says, 'man can live amazing things if they make sense to him'. Without vision the people die, for vision is the food of the soul which is as much in need of nourishment as the body. The Vedas touch one of the profoundest chords that can resound in the human heart, for they reveal man's essential role in the world as an agent between the highest and the lowest; they give that kind of message of creative living which only the supreme vision of Deity and its cosmic Order can impart. This indeed has never been equalled.

When the world is at last becoming more global in its outlook, when one part of the planet can no longer ignore the other parts, when the past compartmentalization in the social and religious orders [is found more and more useless and meaningless through the impact of inter-communication on a world-wide scale which brings home to every one of us the necessity of harmonious relationship and understanding, the supreme vision of cosmic order of the Vedas, an order wherein all are seen as playing a vital role, assumes unprecedented importance. In this century when all mental frontiers are slowly disintegrating, the message of harmonious working together, of Cosmic Integrity, given by the Vedas can no longer be held within its Indian boundaries, in its orthodox chains, it has to burst its traditional bonds and spread over the face of the world, for therein lies the hope of mankind, and the glory of that eternal cosmic harmony to which man must contribute if he is to integrate himself in the vast Order, that Order reflected in the hearts of all those gods and men,

Moving upon the two pathways, ways of the patriarchs and of gods and mortals, (*Rig Veda* X.lxxviii.15.)

the path of out-going and in-going, of involution and evolution, that leads to ultimate victory, when man,

liberated from the paths, verily a pillar of life, stands on firm foundations in the abode of the most High (*Rig Veda* X.v.6.)

and can merge with the solar splendour, or the *atman* of the Upanishads (cf. *Rig Veda* VIII.ci.14; vi.14; vi.10). For the divine

herdsman, the unfaltering one, clothed in diffusive and converging (forces), by the pathways approaching and withdrawing, journeys continuously within the worlds (*Rig Veda* I.cixiv.31.)

and none, not the most materialistic of ages or peoples, will ever conquer that herdsman, whom the Rishis discovered as Agni, the flame

divine 'crouched in the secret places', *Rig Veda* I.Ixii.2, whom the Upanishadic sages called the *atman*, hidden in the 'cave' of the heart, 'before whose majesty death itself is carried away'; for 'That thou art; and that is Truth, that is the divine Order, that is Brahman'. Such identification is the eternally valid message of *Sanatana Dharma*.

Vivekananda at Ridgely Manor

BRAHMACHARINI SUTAPA

A TRANSPARENT light of freedom and joy still dances through the rooms of Ridgely Manor today, and though it is quiet and almost empty, the house seems to remember those two and a half months in 1899 when Swami Vivekananda and his *guru bhais*, brother disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, lived there.

They drove up in a surreys on a late summer afternoon. The horses turned in the gate and up the driveway. Two young Hindu monks in flame coloured robes alighted from the surrey. Before them loomed a stately American mansion with tall white columns; its soft green lawns stretched across for miles into the blue Catskill mountains. Ridgely Manor! Ridgely: joy within, peace and stillness all around: more than a hundred miles up the Hudson from New York City; a hundred and eighty acres far from anywhere. That summer, sounds of merriment rang through its brightly sunlit rooms with their high beamed ceilings and many windows and doors.

After a two-year absence and having established a new monastic organization in India, the Ramakrishna Order, Vivekananda had arrived in New York City that very morning, 26 August, travelling by ship from India via London. He brought with him his brother monk, Swami Turiyananda. Swami Abhedananda, another brother monk, who was lecturing in Maine, came soon after and stayed for ten days.

Vivekananda was the dearest friend and guru of Frank Leggett and his lovely wife, Lady Betty, who eagerly brought him from the city to their country home. They had met in 1895 when Betty and her Paris-dressed sister, Josephine MacLeod, used to attend the Swami's classes

Brahmacharini Sutapa is a member of Sri Sarada Math, Dakshineswar, Calcutta.

in New York. Miss MacLeod, who had travelled in India with Swami Vivekananda in 1898, returned to the West in January 1899. Now they were at Ridgely together. No doubt, the Leggetts' big collie, Tweed, added his barking to the shouts of welcome and greeting. Betty's son Hollister was there and baby Frances came running out barefoot on the grass. A gorgeous vase of flowers decorated the Hall and a meal for the honoured guests was being prepared in the kitchen. At the table, Swami Vivekananda sat near Mother Betty and, from time to time, made amusing comments about the food, such as that he was fond of chocolate ice cream because, as he said, 'I, too, am chocolate'.

These were likely the most restful and happy days that Vivekananda ever had, as he took upon himself neither work nor classes. He wrote from there, 'I have simply been taking rest at the Leggetts' and doing nothing'. Through the Leggetts' care and attention his health improved and he was prepared for his future work. He drew and painted and wrote stories and poems. We can imagine he rode the Leggetts' horses and often took long walks and drives through the beautiful countryside. Maud Stumm, a young artist, visited Ridgely frequently and made some notes at the request of Josephine MacLeod. She wrote, '... Oh, what a figure he was with his flame-coloured robes draped about him as he strode the lawns of Ridgely! His stride came nearer to the poet's description of a "step that spurned the earth" than anything I ever expect to see again. A compelling majesty in his presence and carriage that could not be imitated or described. . .'

The Swamis lived in the Little Cottage. The children stayed over the stables; from their rooms came sounds of a guitar and mandolin, (played by Hollister, then twenty), and much laughter and revelry. This sometimes drove Frank Leggett out of the house for drives into the country, where he sought peace after a hard day at business. For, also, to the Manor House came streams of guests: Margaret Noble, the Swami's disciple, called Sister Nivedita, as a member (*brahmacharini*) of the Ramakrishna Order, had come with them from India but stayed on in London with her family and arrived at Ridgely on 2 September. Sara Bull, also a disciple, who had travelled with them in India, and returned earlier with Josephine MacLeod, came to Ridgely with her daughter, Olea Vaughan, and their friends. The elderly Professor Marchand, who was brought from Paris to teach the children

French, suddenly finding himself on his deathbed there, proclaimed it to be the house of God. Two sisters named McKindly came after hearing from Swami Abhedananda about Vivekananda's arrival. Among the guests were many society people, friends and relatives of the Leggetts.

The Highest Ideal for All

Vivekananda was completely assimilated into the family and loved by every member. It is apparent that he moved with facility among people in both West and East, with adults and with children, always holding before them the way of renunciation as the highest ideal. As Swami Turiyananda once said about his brother monk, 'He never diluted the Truth'. One morning, baby Frances presented him with a bouquet of flowers she had gathered in the garden. He accepted them saying, 'In India we give flowers to our teachers' and blessed her, uttering some Sanskrit words. One day, hearing Swamiji's talk about renunciation, young Hollister protested, saying, 'I don't want to be a monk; I want to marry and have children'. 'All right, my boy', the Swami replied, 'remember only that you choose the harder path'. Later in life, when Hollister was asked by his son, Paul, what he thought about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and about God and life after death, he said, 'Well, I never thought about it all but I know there is a God, because Swami told me so.* Sister Nivedita writes that Swamiji often talked of '*vairagya*', renunciation, during those days at Ridgely; 'how much grander to give one's youth'. . . and adjured the Leggett's daughter, Alberta to give hers. . . 'Those who come to it old', he said, 'attain their own salvation, but they cannot be Gurus—they cannot show many—those who come young shall carry many across, *without any benefit to themselves*'.

At the dinner parties at Ridgely the ladies wore lovely gowns and jewels and the lights and flowers decorating the table dazzled their eyes. Through all the din of the gay chatter of the guests the Swami was heard to say to one of them, 'Don't let it fool you, Baby'. We can see Swamiji later pacing up and down, warning Nivedita 'against politeness, against this "lovely" and "beautiful", against this "continual feeling of the external", admonishing her "to get rid of all these petty relations of society and home, to hold the soul firm against the

* This incident was told to the writer by Paul Sturges, Hollister's son.

perpetual appeals of the senses, to realize that the rapture of autumn trees is as truly sense-enjoyment as a comfortable bed or a table dainty; to hate the silly praise and blame of people. . .”

Every evening after dinner all the members of the household and the guests would gather in the Hall of the Manor house, Swamiji sitting by the fireplace. A holy atmosphere pervaded Ridgely as Swamiji talked; his large eyes, as one of the guests described, seemed to them like black bees, turning from one to another of the listeners as they tasted the sweetness of his words. For in the midst of light talk, he would give them the truths that had come to him from his own rich experience. His listeners would roar with laughter one moment and the next, be lifted up and carried to a lofty spiritual realm. ‘One evening’, Josephine MacLeod writes, ‘about a dozen people listening, his voice becoming so soft and seemingly far away; when the evening was over, we all separated without even saying good-night to each other’.

These were ‘... golden days and ... velvet nights and walks under the stars barefooted on the dewy grass and talks of God and the human soul—and last hours’ gatherings in the Hall, doors open to the summer night, while the song of crickets interpenetrated the Swami’s rolling sentences that none dared answer as one by one they crept silently to bed’.

Besides these nightly talks to which everyone gathered to hear, Swamiji also often talked at length after breakfast, after lunch and many times in between. The main theme of these talks was renunciation. Vivekananda was preparing Nivedita for her future work. He had hopes for the regeneration of his country through women. ‘Women and the people’ was the watchword. He wanted to start a women’s Math to instrumentalize his plan for the education of women through the leadership of the Indian women themselves, as he thought them best able to solve their own problems. Though he considered the establishment of this women’s work of primary importance, he found no Indian woman able to help him, such was the social situation of women at that time. When Vivekananda met Nivedita he soon realized that this work would have to be started by someone with her qualities: well-educated, articulate and with a strong, dharmic and attractive personality. She had the fiery energy of a brilliant organizer.

The women’s work was to be initiated by establishing a school. The Project of the Ramakrishna School for Girls, as it was to be called,

was to secure a house and land on the bank of the Ganga near Calcutta. There, girls, including orphans and young widows, would live under the spiritual guidance of Sri Sarada Devi, the wife and spiritual successor of Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna. As a spiritual ministrator she represented the Shakti or power of the Ramakrishna Order though she did not take an active role in its missionary work. The school would also train teachers from amongst its students who, with an extended education, would dedicate their lives in service and renunciation and start new schools after this model in other parts of India.

In these weeks at Ridgely, Vivekananda discussed his plans for the school with Nivedita and prepared her for her role of leadership in this work which required a life of renunciation and service. On 21 September she decided to wear the 'nuns' garb', that is, to distinguish herself as a *brahmacharini*, she would wear a white robe when lecturing and black at other times.

Most likely, besides Nivedita, Sara Bull and Josephine MacLeod, among those present, were those who most appreciated the Swami's talks at Ridgely. But for Josephine, an event occurred which soon deprived her of hearing more of them. Within two weeks of Swamiji's arrival at Ridgely a letter came from California bearing the news to Betty and Josephine that their brother was very ill and perhaps dying. As Betty was hostess it was decided that Josephine would go immediately to see him.

The Culmination of Nivedita's Lessons

Nivedita and Josephine MacLeod shared a very close relationship, for they had travelled together with Vivekananda in India. Nivedita often depended upon Josephine's interpretations of Vivekananda and received much support and encouragement from her. 'Joe' was much older and her relationship with Vivekananda was that of a close friend rather than a disciple. Nivedita kept up a constant correspondence with Josephine whenever they were separated, informing her of her daily activities. Nivedita had come to Ridgely on 2 September and she began her letters to Josephine MacLeod, then in California on 9 October.* The references to Swamiji's talks begin in a letter of the 13th:

She writes that on Wednesday, 10 October, Swamiji spoke at

* These letters have been recently published in Volume I of the *Letters of Sister Nivedita* edited by Sankari Prasad Basu.

night about Mira Bai 'and how her husband offered to build her a great temple in Brindavan if only she would not go out in public'. Nivedita did not understand why she did not accept the temple and asked Swamiji. 'Was she living down here in this mire?' he retorted, all aglow. 'Could she understand his miserable little reasons about his honour and his kingdom? Wasn't it gross and brutal of him to dare to call himself her husband? Wasn't it? Wasn't it?'

On Thursday the 12th, Swamiji talked about the ideals of renunciation 'and about loving misery and embracing death. . . . The only civilizations that were really stable were those that had been "touched by Vairagya . . . Let your life in the world be nothing but a thinking to yourself". . . . Even meditation would be a bondage to the free soul, but Shiva goes on and on for the good of the world—the Eternal Incarnation—and Hindus believe that but for the prayers and meditations of these great souls, the world would fall to pieces at once. . . . For meditation is the greatest service—the most direct—that can be rendered.' He was talking too of the Himalayan snows, and the green of the forests melting into them—"Nature making Eternal Suttie on the body of Mahadev", he quoted from Kalidas . . . eternally renouncing her own life for Him!

Nivedita's next letter is dated 18 October and is written from the Inn Cottage where she had been staying in retreat for a few days. In this letter she mentions that on Sunday, the 15th, Swamiji quoted the *Katha Upanishad*, 'When desire is all gone and all the cords of the heart are broken—then man attains to immortality'. Before lunch Swamiji took Nivedita to Mrs. Vaughan's house and as they came home he broke out against wife-worship. Motherhood was greater than wifehood—he said. Later, Alberta asked Swamiji, 'Is there no happiness in marriage?' He replied, 'Yes Alberta, if marriage is entered into as a great austerity and everything is given up—even principle!'

In the afternoon of Monday, the 16th, Vivekananda talked to Nivedita and Mrs. Briggs. The talk began with his translation of a song by Ram Prasad which began with the words:

From the land where there is no night
Has come unto me a man.
And day and night are now nothing to me.

Nivedita included the translation of the song in her book, *Kali the Mother*, which she wrote at Ridgely. After reciting this song, Swamiji recalled, 'Oh, what weird scenes this brings before me! —the weirdest

scenes of my whole life. Perfect silence—broken only by the cries of the jackals—in the darkness under the great Tree at Dakshineswar. Night after night we sat there the whole night through, and he talked to me, when I was a boy.'

'And then he went on,' Nivedita continues in her letter of 18 October: 'The Guru was always Siva, and was always to be worshipped as Siva—"because he sat under the tree to teach and destroyed Ignorance. One must offer all one's doings—or even merit would become a bondage and create Karma. . . But there is one Soul that can take it all without harm—One who is eternally protected—eternally the same—unspoilt—He who drank the poison of the world and only made Himself the Blue-Throated. Offer all you do to Siva."'

Then he talked of Nivedita's school—'Give them all you like—Margot—never mind A B C. It matters nothing. Give them—as much Ram Prasad and Ram Krishna and Siva and Kali as you like—and don't cheat these Western people—don't pretend it's education and A B C that you want. And *demand* help—don't beg it. Remember, you are only the servant of Mother. And if She sends you nothing, be thankful that She lets you free. I wish She would let me.'

Nivedita's account continues on the 27th: 'He . . . told me how it was Sri Rama Krishna's firm belief that every great Incarnation either in public or in secret had been a worshipper of Mother. "Or how could he have got the Energy?" Siva and Kali had *had* to be their worship.' Then he talked about the story of Rama's worship of the Divine Mother and about the leonine courage of Ravana's wife. Nivedita exclaims, '. . . What ideals of womanhood Swami holds! Surely no one, not even Shakespeare or Aeschylus when he wrote of Antigone, or Sophocles when he created Alcestis had such a tremendous conception. As I read over the things he has said to me of them, and as I realise that it is all, every word of it, a trust for the women of the whole world's future—but first and chiefly for them of his own land—it seems a trifling thing whether oneself should ever be worthy or not—and EVERYTHING that a heart so great as his should have willed to create. Oh, to be the chisel in his hand—is great great great but I would not even be that, if without a tool, HIS power to fashion the statue were the more apparent to the world.

'On Tuesday night, the 24th, when I came down, he came by degrees to that wonderful mood of devotion, and told us of Hrishikesh,

and the little hut that each sannyasin would make for himself, and the blazing fire in the evening, and all the sannyasins sitting round it on their own little mats—talking in hushed tones of the Upanishads—“for a man is supposed to have got the truth before he becomes a sannyasin. He is at peace intellectually. All that remains is to realise it. So all need for discussion has passed away and at Hrishikesh, in the darkness of the mountains, by the blazing fire, they may only talk of the Upanishads. Then, by degrees, the voices die in silence. Each man sits upright on his mat and one by one they steal quietly off to their own huts.”

Renunciation Is the Whole Law

Nivedita writes: ‘On Wednesday, the 25th, he said much at one time and another. He broke out once into the greatest things I ever heard him say—“The great defect of Hinduism has been that it offered Salvation only on the basis of Renunciation. The householder was bound by his consciousness of an inferior lot. His part was Karma. Renunciation was nothing to him. But I have solved the question differently. Renunciation is the whole law. It is all illusion that anyone is trying to do anything else. We are all struggling to realise this great mass of energy. What does that mean but that we are hurrying towards Death?—as fast as we can. All of us. The burly Englishman who thinks he wants to possess the earth is really struggling harder than most of us to die. Evil, a special instance of good—the desire for life, one method of the love of Death.”’

On Wednesday night Vivekananda talked about purity—‘as it must be practised and given’ . . . “Brahmacharya”, he said, “should burn like the fire of GOD within the veins”.

On Saturday, 4 November, when Nivedita came late to breakfast the Swami was talking of the double strain in us of preference and approval; how we often give way to desire and that our only guide should be the Good. ‘Therefore,’ he said, ‘the wise man is he who likes nothing and witnesses all. Men find it easy to play part of life—but *something* holds the heart captive—and then they do not play. Let the whole be play—like nothing. Act a part all the time.’

Nivedita that day received a letter from Josephine MacLeod and at lunch she announced, ‘Yum Yum says that she wants nothing and nobody.’ Swamiji responded, ‘with a throb in his voice, “No, she doesn’t. That’s right. It’s the last stage one comes to, and then it’s all giving. The beggar must look for alms and rebuffs. But for him who asks

nothing, there are no rebuffs." "

' . . . he was talking in the old way about escaping from the world. He has been reciting the hatred of Fame and Wealth all his life, but he is only now beginning to understand what it really means. It is becoming unbearable. . . . And then he began to repeat—"And so to Thee—Ramakrishna (with a pause) I betake myself. For in Thy Feet alone is the Refuge of man." "

On Sunday, 5 November, Swamiji urged Nivedita to plunge into the work, saying that she was a Kshatriya, not a Brahmin, that she was a worker and a fighter. He blessed her and told her to go out into the world and fight for him. That then he could go to his peace. So it was decided that she would leave for Chicago to lecture and raise funds for the future work for women. In Nivedita's letter of 11 November 1895, there is an account of that day at Ridgely and its momentous incident which she felt to be the great turning point of her life. As she was helping him pack, he took out silk turbans to give the girls and two pieces of *gerua* cloth. Then, 'He called me to my room', she writes, 'where Mrs. Bull sat writing, to give these and left the turbans to one side'.

'First he shut the door—then he arranged the cloth as a skirt & chudder round her waist—then he called her a sannyasini & putting one hand on her head & one on mine he said: "I give you *a//* that Ramakrishna P(aramahansa) gave to me. What came to us from a woman (the Divine Mother) I give to you two women. Do what you can with it. I cannot trust myself. I do not know what I might do tomorrow & ruin the work. Women's hands will be the best anyway to hold what came from a woman—from Mother. Who & what She is, I do not know, I have never seen Her, but Ramakr(ishna) P. saw Her & touched Her, like this (touching my sleeve). She may be a great disembodied spirit for all I know. Anyway I cast the load on you. I am going away to be at peace. I felt nearly mad this morning, & I was thinking and thinking what I could do, when I went to my room to sleep before lunch. And then I thought of this & I was so glad. It is like a release. I have borne it all this time, & now I have given it up. . . ."

Two days later, Nivedita started for Chicago and Swamiji left with Mrs. Bull for New York. Nivedita's plans for the school would soon be published in book form and within a few months she would form the 'Ramakrishna Guild of Help in America' with Mrs. Leggett as President

and Mrs. Ole Bull as Secretary and with representatives including Josephine MacLeod, in New York, Boston, Detroit and Chicago.

Vivekananda's stay at Ridgely and his training of Nivedita concerning renunciation, was an '... interlude, of course; but a foretaste of great happenings. A mighty movement had been set in motion; one that would outspan their personal lives as God Himself seemed to walk and talk with them.'

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Sudhira Devi

PRAVRAJIKA SHRADDHAPRANA

BEFORE SUDHIRA Bose was born, her family moved from Jejur, a small village in the Hooghly district of West Bengal to Star Theatre Lane in north Calcutta. She was born on 18 November 1889, the youngest of six children. When she was only two, her father passed away. Her eldest brother, Devavrata Bose, (later known as Swami Prajnanda), brought her up affectionately and moulded her young and fresh mind. In those days of foreign rule, women's education was restricted to the protected environment of their homes. But because of the influence of the Brahmo Samaj on Sudhira's father, the women of his family had some formal education. Sudhira studied in the Brahmo Girls' School up to Class VIII. After the death of her mother in 1903 Sudhira's freedom-loving nature found expression in becoming bold, fearless and patriotic.

In 1905, when Sudhira was sixteen, she went on a pilgrimage to Puri with her cousin. There was no railway to Puri in those days and the journey was not at all safe. To protect herself she dressed as a *sannyasini*. Clad in *gerua* with a trident and *kamandalu* in hand, she

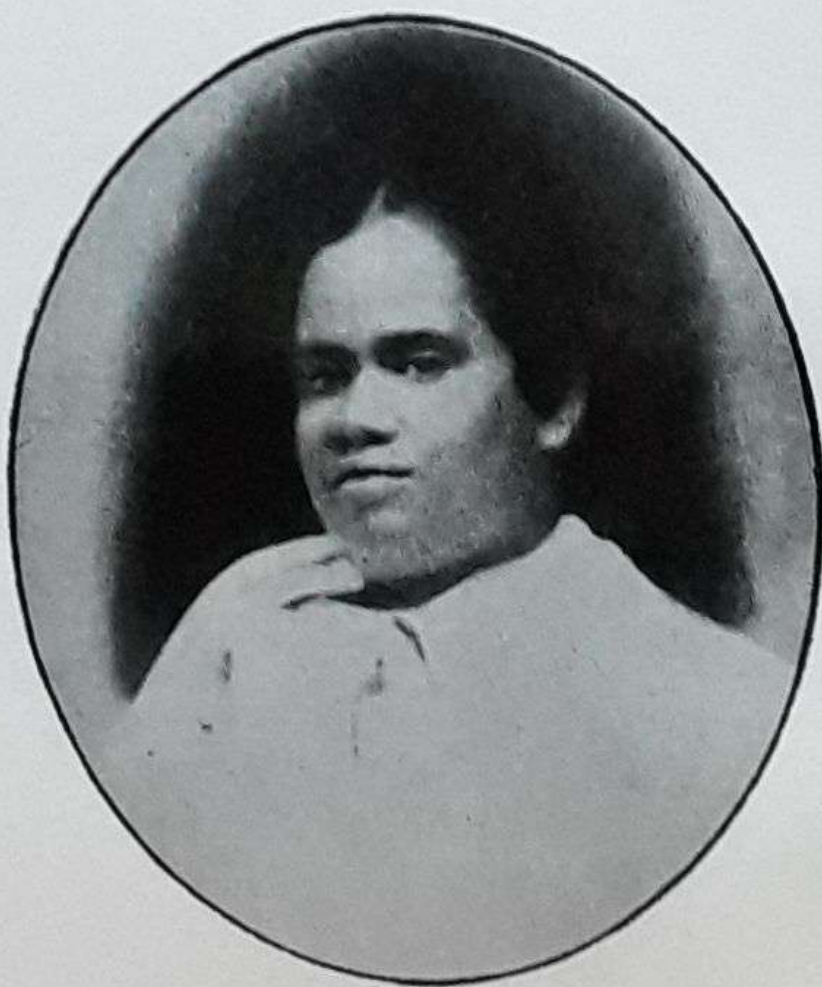
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Ridgely Manor



The 'Little Cottage'



Sudhira Devi

walked the dusty roads, ready to face any danger which may come on the way. It did come. One day when the two weary travellers were making their way along a lonely and deserted path, Sudhira became conscious that a man with apparent evil intention was following them. Instead of being afraid she boldly turned round, raised her trident and frightened him away. In the years following this pilgrimage the desire to live the life of a *sannyasini* captured her mind.

Before her brother Devavrata joined the Ramakrishna Order and became a *sannyasi* he was deeply involved in the revolutionary movement. Revolutionaries often came to their house to discuss the political situation and adopt means to free India from British rule. Devavrata was the editor of the revolutionary Dawn Society's magazine for which Swami Vivekananda's disciple, Sister Nivedita, also wrote. Nivedita provided leadership and inspiration to these young men. When Devavrata saw that Sudhira was not interested in marrying he arranged for her to work in the school run by Sister Nivedita and Sister Christine. It was in 1906 when Sudhira first came to Nivedita's school. In the women's section of the school she regularly taught Bengali literature and the *Gita*. She considered it a privilege to offer this service to her country and society and gradually the school became her all in all. In her leisure time she learned English from Sister Nivedita and Sister Christine and addressed Sister Christine affectionately as 'Chod'di', or younger sister, as she was the younger of the two Sisters. Sister Christine often visited Sudhira's home. Through both the Sisters Sudhira became acquainted with Vivekananda's ideal and she began to experience a deep spiritual yearning. Whenever she got the opportunity she visited the Holy Mother, who was staying at the Udbodhan House nearby. Attracted by the Holy Mother's love, Sudhira took initiation from her in 1910 on the sacred full moon day in the month of Vaishakh on which the Buddha was born.

Dedicated Life

Sudhira's brother joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1909 and since that day she felt a strong desire to live the life of a *sannyasini*. A beautiful harmony between the devotion and austerity of an aspirant and the dedication of a selfless worker was seen to develop in her life. Moulding her character to the strict ideal of a *brahmacharini*, she daily bathed in the Ganga, studied scriptures and practised *japa* and meditation with unflinching regularity. At the same time she showed great

interest in all the school activities. She loved her students and because of her sweet nature and kind heart, the students also loved her. Once when she suddenly received the news of the death of one of her students she cried like a bereaved mother and for a long time avoided walking along the street where that pupil had lived. The students of the women's section had deep regard for her. Many were so influenced by her that they were eager to do whatever work she asked of them. Though she was not much older than these women, most of them looked upon her as an elder sister. She wanted her students to become fearless, strong, active and agile, ever ready to serve and ever conscious of their goal.

Sudhira Devi was always ready to help independent-minded women who had spiritual aspirations, even against the rigid rules of society. No obstacle ever deterred her from this help. For instance, one of her students was Sarala Devi, who later became the well-known *sannyasini*, Pravrajika Bharatiprana, the first President of Sri Sarada Math. When she was a student in the Nivedita School, though according to orthodox Hindu tradition she had been married young, she, too, had a strong yearning to live the life of a *sannyasini*. Sarala was sent to Sudhira's ancestral home in the remote village of Jajur for some time to save her from the wrath of her family who did not want her to live the life of a *sannyasini*. Sister Sudhira later made arrangements for Sarala to take a course in nursing at the Lady Dufferin Hospital so she could be independent. Golap Ma, one of the orthodox women disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, was horrified and exclaimed to Sri Sarada Devi, 'Do you still expect us to eat the food she prepares after serving people of all castes and religions and, what's more, in a Christian hospital? You can't be serious!' Mother waited patiently until the outburst subsided and then reasoned, 'Dear Golap, do you know why she is being sent there? One day *we* will be in need of her services.'

It was an unthinkable bold step for those times. Even Sister Nivedita was startled at this incident and remarked about Sudhira's bringing this girl out of the bonds of society saying, 'Indeed Sudhira has done a brave deed!' Once Swami Saradananda came back from some famine relief work and entrusted an orphan girl called Bhuti to Sudhira's care. In spite of her many activities she willingly accepted the responsibility of bringing her up.

Sudhira's life was tuned to the lofty mood of detachment and

renunciation so she was indifferent to mundane details. Sister Nivedita, on the other hand, following the frugal tradition of the Ramakrishna Order, did not waste useful material, however trifling, and was ever watchful that her pupils learned this. Sister Sudhira did not have the courage to protest to Nivedita but one day remarked to Sister Christine, 'But we are *sannyasinis*; should we have any attachment for such petty things?' In the midst of casual conversation with Nivedita and Sudhira, Sister Christine repeated Sudhira's remark. Sister Nivedita became very serious and turning to Sudhira said firmly, 'Sudhira, never say such a thing; don't even indulge in such thoughts.'

Gradually Sudhira became an indispensable support to Nivedita and Christine. After Nivedita's death in 1911, she worked with Sister Christine till 1914. Sister Christine went to America the same year but she could not return before 1924.

In the Capacity of an Administrator

Sister Sudhira now took charge of the school. Although immersed in her responsibilities, Sudhira never forgot the higher purpose behind the project of Sister Nivedita's school: that it would be the nucleus of the future women's work. After Christine's departure for America a few girls educated in the school were inspired to take the vow of *brahmacharya*. Sudhira took the formative step to inaugurate an ashrama annexed to the school for its dedicated workers and gave it the name 'Matri Mandir'.

In this she was encouraged by Swami Saradananda, the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. He was so moved by her ability as an organizer that after her death he wrote:

'Sudhira, who had taken the vow to dedicate her life for 'the welfare of the world as well as her own liberation', *सर्वलोकानां कल्याणाय च*, died when she was only thirty-three. But the work she did with great organizing skill and infinite patience could not have been accomplished in the life of a man though he lived a life of eighty years. Her heart was so full of selfless love and sweetness that whoever met her even once became her very own.'

Sri Sarada Devi was very happy with Sudhira's endeavour to start a women's ashrama. When the members of the ashrama found the space inadequate to their number they had to shift to another rented house. When Sri Sarada Devi heard this she said, 'My daughters are

wandering about like this. It would be very good if they had a permanent home! A similar incident occurred in the history of the Ramakrishna Mission when the Holy Mother saw the young monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna wandering about and prayed to the Master for their welfare saying:

'... I have seen in Varanasi and Brindavan many holy men who get their food by begging and shift their stay from the shade of one tree to that of another. There is no dearth of holy men of that type. I cannot bear to see the plight of my sons, who go forth in your name, roaming about begging their food. My prayer is that those who leave the world in your name may never be in want of bare subsistence. They will all live together holding to your ideas and ideals; and people afflicted with the sorrows of the world will resort to them and be solaced by hearing about you. That is why you came, My heart aches to see them wandering.'

After the Matri Mandir was started Sudhira invited the Holy Mother to perform Sri Ramakrishna's worship there. Once Sri Sarada Devi expressed her desire to stay in Sister Sudhira's ashrama for a few days. Sudhira made all arrangements for the Mother's stay and at once shifted with her students to another house so that the Mother could live there in comfort. The Holy Mother stayed happily in the Matri Mandir for a month and blessed Sudhira and her school. After the passing away of Sri Sarada Devi the name of the Matri Mandir was changed to Sarada Mandir.

Sudhira had exceptional capacity as an administrator. She encouraged her young students to do social service and sent them in batches to work in different localities as she saw the need. In 1917 the Ramakrishna Mission hospital in Varanasi started a women's section to train women in nursing. Sister Sudhira agreed to take the responsibility of organizing it. After it was established she entrusted the work to two of her senior students. She was then invited to start a girls' school in East Bengal and after making the necessary arrangements for its establishment, she sent Sarala Devi and another of her students to share the administrative responsibilities. Sudhira engaged her students in such works as these and made them self-reliant. If anyone hesitated to undertake a difficult task she encouraged her saying, 'Why are you afraid? Everything becomes smooth and favourable by the Master's grace.' She had complete trust in Sri Ramakrishna. Many of the

young women with whom she associated were from conservative families and not accustomed to going out alone. She always encouraged them to travel alone. Most of them were child-widows and to adjust with them she wore what was accepted as widow's clothes, though it was odd for an unmarried girl to dress that way.

In 1918 the Sister Nivedita Girls' School, which had been operating independently, officially became a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission. Meanwhile the number of people living in the ashrama increased and a new plot of land was bought. It seemed hopeful that this noble endeavour for which the Sisters worked all these years would fulfil Swami Vivekananda's plan of a nucleus of the women's organization. But things seemed to take a different turn. In 1920 the Holy Mother became very ill. Sudhira sent Sarala Devi to nurse her. She herself was constantly anxious about the Mother's health. Whenever she could snatch some free time she rushed to the Udbodhan House nearby and quietly sat at her feet. Sri Sarada Devi was the source of her inspiration for her spiritual life as well as all her activities. To console her students, who were also devotees of the Mother, Sudhira took them for visits to Dakshineswar and the Ramakrishna Math at Belur. She worked throughout the day at the school but from time to time she longed for that silent hour at the end of the busy day when she could sit at the Mother's feet and her tired mind would be refreshed with new hope.

Pilgrimage

Sudhira's diverse activities through the years were often interspersed with pilgrimages to most of the holy places of India. Sri Sarada Devi went into *mahasamadhi* in 1920. During the *puja* holidays following the passing away of Sri Sarada Devi, Sudhira planned a pilgrimage with her students to Varanasi, hoping that the holy atmosphere of the sacred city would console them. They first went to Hrishikesh, Haridwar and Allahabad, but could not for a moment forget the Mother.

From Allahabad they took the train for Varanasi. On 23 November as the train neared the holy city the sun was beginning to set. And at that auspicious hour, when people turn their minds toward God, she asked one of her students for some food. The student was surprised that Sister Sudhira would think of taking food at that time. After eating, Sudhira went to the bathroom to wash her hands. She was coming out of the bathroom when suddenly the carriage door flung open.

Sudhira fell out onto the ground below. This incident was recorded in the forceful words of Swami Saradananda's obituary which was published in a miscellany, *Vividha Prasanga*.¹ He wrote:

'Only eight or ten miles before reaching the Varanasi Cantonment, as the train was coming to a station, suddenly she fell down on the ground from the train and became unconscious. There was no sign of external injury so everybody hoped that she would soon be all right. She was brought to Varanasi by the same train at eleven o'clock at night. In the Ramakrishna Mission hospital there she was immediately treated by experienced doctors. The painful night was over at length. But Sudhira never returned to consciousness. The morning sun slowly made its way to the zenith. Sudhira's condition took a turn for the worse. At last the doctors gave up all hope and entrusted her to the care of the presiding deity of Varanasi, the great physician who severs the bonds of worldly existence, Lord Vishvanath. At three o'clock in the afternoon Sudhira's face shone with inexpressible beauty and effulgence. Everyone understood that her lifelong vow of *brahmacharya* and austerity was fulfilled and she was free from all suffering. The Divine Mother of the Universe had transformed Her own daughter into an effulgent goddess. O Vrata-Dharini! Today your vow is consummated. Your renunciation is complete.'

Darkness was slowly enveloping the sacred city when the funeral pyre was lit. The deep resonating echo of the Lord Vishvanath's *arati* came wafted on the breeze along the Ganga: 'Jaya Shiva Omkara, bhaja Shiva Omkara—Brahma Vishnu Sadashiva, Hara Hara Mahadeva.' The holy Manikarnika Ghat was instantly filled with the brightness of the fire which, responding to the sublime tones of the *arati*, danced in pure joy. The fire went up and up, leaping beyond the height of a house nearby. All onlookers were stricken with awe. Suddenly there appeared on the scene a sadhu smeared with ashes. Dancing with joy, he went round and round the funeral pyre exclaiming, 'Ahl What a wonder! Never in all the days I have dwelt here have I witnessed such a sight!'

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A Letter from Sister Christine to Sister Sudhira*

June 27, 1919

My dear Sudhira,

Both your letters came in due time and I long to be with you to give you comfort and courage. I don't know why I have not written to you sooner. My thoughts have been with you much. Perhaps I could help you if I were there. If there were any way humanly possible to come, you know I should be there. Sachin's passing was simply unbelievable. Coming so soon after your brother's one can only stand still and ask, 'What does it mean?' Perhaps in ten years from now we shall understand. And——too! Poor child! Perhaps that is best. She would have suffered much in the years to come because she had no real place in that great life. There are few in the world that would be equal to that. It is too much to ask of an ordinary woman. That was the tragedy of it. When I told you the first time I saw her that she did not have the capacity, I meant for that position. But she was good and she tried and I think she loved truly. The next time she comes she will be a great woman. You were a help to her. You did what perhaps no one else could have done. Let that be your comfort.

Now Sudhira, about the other things you write about, I am sorry that you feel as you do. If you or I have made mistakes let us forget them and work. We have no right to waste our energy in regrets—or in weakness of any kind.

Do you read Swamiji's lectures often, especially the Gnana lectures—and the *Gita* and the Upanishads? They all preach strength. That was Swamiji's great message. If we do not live it, we have not heard the message. He says over and over again, 'If you have made a mistake, never mind, go on.' Let us be real disciples.

And remember this: We are the servants of our own Karma. Nothing can happen to me that does not belong to me. Every effect has a cause which I myself set in motion. No one can injure me, no one can help me but myself. Others are only the instruments for working out

* This portion of a letter was found among Sister Christine's papers in the collection of Mrs. Gertrude Emerson Sen, Almora.

my Karma. This law will be in operation until I get Mukti. Then I shall be free from it. This I know is true, Sudhira. So how can I blame anyone or hold anyone responsible? But if we are wise, we learn our lesson from these happenings, we learn non-attachment. And now I think I have learned mine and it leads me to this decision: I want you to consider yourself the permanent head of the school with full and independent authority, just as much as if I had passed out of the body in 1913, as I so nearly did. Now you are free to go on with the building of your school in Nivedita Lane. Build it according to your own ideas, do not be influenced by anything I have ever said. I shall live at 17 Bosepara as long as it is available. I shall probably be back before your building is completed and then we can make further arrangements. Do not feel that you are bound in any way to carry out my ideas. This is your work and you are free. I mean every word of that. I shall begin some new work—I don't know what. I shall wait until I see clearly. It will probably not be a school and it looks now as if it would not take the form about which I have dreamed all these years. But one thing I shall not lose sight of: that we must produce a few women of unusual intellectual and spiritual power who will combine the best and noblest of the East and the West without the faults of either. They must have great spiritual illumination and force, for without that all the work is in vain. With a few such women, we can safely leave the future. Until we have produced them neither you nor I have the right to die. I know you will say that you have not the strength nor the heart to go on with the work. But you will find that you have sources of strength and power that you never dreamed of. A great work requires great training. We are stripped before we are clothed with power.

Strength is life, weakness is death. Strength is felicity, life eternal, immortal: weakness is constant strain and misery . . .

Swami Vivekananda

Mysticism, Vedantic and Christian

SWAMI NITYABODHANANDA

THE GOAL of all mysticism is the mystical union of the individual soul and the Supreme. In Vedantic language it is known as *jiva-brahmai-kya*. It is an ineffable experience which breaks through all limitations imposed by the ego and empirical life. The *maha-vakyas* of the Upanishads, the great utterances like 'Thou art That' go straight to the centre of the problem by affirming the identity of the *jiva* and Brahman. When the teacher in the Upanishad says to the disciple 'Thou art That', 'That' signifies Brahman, the teacher is affirming only the secondary identity and not the primary one. The disciple as he is, is not identic with Brahman. He has to actualize his identity by discipline. And this actualization can be sudden, abrupt or progressive. At the end of the route the disciple has to come by the *Brahma-akara-vritti* which is Brahman's light manifested in a mental modification. This gives place to *Ahamgraha-upasana*, grasping one's self as Brahman.

For Christians the ultimate goal of life is union with Jesus Christ, in all his truth and glory; it is a union with the historical Christ.

It may not be out of place to add that the first thinker in the West to use the expression 'mystic' was Denys l'Areopagite of the First century. According to him, in order to realize Being one should go beyond all thought-images and all reasoning. The perfect Knowledge of God obtains itself by 'ignorance' and in virtue of an incomprehensible union. The soul, abandoning everything and forgetting herself unites with the light of Divine glory in her pristine purity. Great mystics like Tauler, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila have followed the same line of thought.

The Goal and the Way

The *maha-vakyas* indicate the goal and the way. They are: Thou art That (Brahman) (*Chandogya Upanishad, Sama Veda*) I am Brahman (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Yajur Veda*) This self is Brahman (*Mandukya Upanishad, Atharva Veda*) Consciousness is Brahman (*Alitareya Upanishad, Rig Veda*).

The fourth *maha-vakya*, 'Consciousness is Brahman' offers the means to realize the identity-experience. The declaration does not say 'Brahman *has* Consciousness'; it says 'Brahman *is* Consciousness'.

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When Consciousness, *Samvit*, is realized as the substance and not as an attribute, as for instance, 'the Sun is light' and not 'has light',—then identity is real and unalterable.

The Bhakti schools conceive the Supreme not in the impersonal aspect but as the home of infinite auspicious qualities. For them what is important is the cultivation of the sentiment of 'belonging to' God. 'O Lord, I belong to you and you belong to me.' This is the divine promise contained in the *Gita* declaration '*ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktya* (IX.29), 'those, indeed, who worship Me, with devotion'. That intense *bhakti* can bring us to the intuition of identity between the individual soul and the Supreme is borne out by the declaration of the *gopis* in the *Bhagavata*. 'O Krishna, we do not see you as the son of Vasudeva, but as the soul of all living beings.' This suggests the Antaryamin doctrine of the Upanishads. The Antaryamin, the dweller within, is not a slave of time. It is the Timeless. It is neither born nor will it die. Its reflection in our hearts may be in time. But in truth it is Eternal Presence.

Between the *bhakta's* position, I am Thy Servant (*dasa-aham*) and that of the *jnani*, I am He (*sa-aham*) is there a fundamental cleavage? If we add *da* to *soham*, it becomes *dasoham* (I am thy servant) and again if we add *sa* to *dasoham*, it becomes *sada-sa-aham*, which means I am always what I am.

Vedantic Ways to Mystical Union

The four yogas, *Bhakti*, *Karma*, *Jnana* and *Raja* as also the derived ones like *Laya Yoga* and *Mantra Yoga* are the ways to union. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda laid emphasis on the harmony of the yogas for the integration of the human personality and for the achievement of human destiny. By harmony they meant the choice of one yoga, for instance, the *Bhakti Yoga* for the emotive temperament and the arrangement of the other yogas all round the primordial sentiment of *bhakti*. No *bhakta* can be a real *bhakta* without nourishing his *bhakti* with *jnana*, without allowing his fervour to flow in *Karma Yoga* and without sitting down to meditate (*Raja Yoga*).

On the top of the harmony of yogas Sri Ramakrishna showed his preference for *bhakti* for our epoch, the *Kali yuga*. He must have had reasons for it. Man in this age has not changed essentially, but his environment has changed. He has become a slave of his environment. Witness, for instance, the influence on him of advertisements. *Bhakti Yoga*, more than the other yogas, with its *bhajans* and the

inspiring presence of the *bhaktas*, can give a transforming environment to modern man.

Man today is terribly lonely. It is a loneliness resulting from separation from his inner Self, from the division within his inner Kingdom. In the West the term 'existential void' has become a current expression to describe this loneliness. Separation from the Self is separation from God. The *vyakulata* (extreme anguish of separation) which is the primary condition, according to Vaishnavites, for opening the flood-gates of God's love is modernized in the *Kali yuga* as existential void. It is open to the modern man to feel in the existential void the presence of the flame of *vyakulata*, the flame turned upside down. A flame turned upside down is anguished. Nevertheless it is still a flame asking the one who holds it to put in an upright position'.

Christian Ways to Mystical Union

Baptism seals the union with Christ. According to the view of the whole early church, baptism is a sacrament unconditionally necessary for the Christian. Whoever has received this sacrament bears to all eternity the indelible mark of Christ. 'Mass' is the common designation for the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist sacrifice is a rite for which the scriptural terms are 'Breaking Bread', 'the Lord's Supper', and 'Communion'. In oriental Christianity the term that gradually gained general acceptance was 'the Sacred Liturgy'. The term 'Lord's supper' is so called from its particular reference to and connection with Jesus. 'Holy Communion' is so-called because of the fellowship with Jesus and the believers who participate in the observance.

What interests us most in the symbolism of the Mass is the spiritual elevation lived through and the mystical union with Christ obtained. The officiating priest raises high the cup of wine with the special bread repeating the words of Jesus at the Last Supper in invocation. The belief is that the words of Christ pronounced by the priest, whoever he may be, have the power of transforming the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. As the priest personifies Christ it can be seen that it is a sacrifice of God by God himself. *It is an act of spontaneous love.* Those who participate in the Mass and live through this high elevation of the sacrificial-sacramental rite with faith are supremely benefited. In the life and message of Jesus Christ we find the luminous expression of the four classical yogas:

Bhakti Yoga: Jesus was a *Bhakta* of the highest order. Extreme closeness to God, whose prominent expression was the life of prayer and absolute submission to His will in all circumstances, blazes forth in Jesus. Mark says that often Jesus prayed alone (1.35). According to Luke, Jesus sometimes prayed all night (VI.12). The Gospels make out that both his teachings and actions carried the mark of 'authority'. From where came this 'authority'? From the sense of commission he received from God. When the Pharisees challenged him saying that his testimony was his own and not that of God, Jesus replied: 'My judgements are true, for I am not alone. The Father who sent me is with me.' (John VIII.16). Again: 'Believe me, I am in the Father and the Father in me.' (John XIV.11). 'As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you, continue ye in my love.'

Karma Yoga: To one anchored in God like Jesus, a contemplative life could have been the proper mode of life. But he chose the 'anchor' and the moving ship of activity. The Son of God is a servant of man. The Son of God has come to serve and not to be served. We find Jesus engaging himself in three kinds of activity to illustrate the intimate relation between contemplation and action, as also to affirm that, the first commandment, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, must flow into the practice of loving 'thy neighbour as thy self'. What are the three activities?

Jesus had great appeal to all. He spoke in the synagogues, he preached in the open air, he taught wherever he could find an audience. His important goal was to make people conscious that the presence of God was a pressing reality.

His second activity was his personal ministry to human needs: he healed the sick of body and mind, he awakened the faith of those who had lost hope and the courage to live.

These two activities have to be sustained by the force of conviction so well expressed in Matthew's Gospel: 'Come to me, those who are heavy laden; I will relieve you. Accept my yoke, which is easy and which makes your burden light' (XI.28-30).

Raja Yoga: A soul devoted and purified by *Bhakti Yoga* and divinely inspired by dedicated action (*Karma Yoga*) is ready and ripe to sit down and meditate. And that is precisely what Christ enjoins us to do: 'When thou prayest enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door pray to thy Father which is in secret.' The 'secret' of the

Father is the heart as is often insisted on by the *Philokalia* tradition. 'In the morning, force your mind to descend from the head to the heart and hold it there'—parallel with the *Gita* instruction 'fixing the mind in the heart' (*mano hridi niruddhya cha*)—and repeat 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me'.

All of us possess a 'glorious body' which can be made manifest by meditation. Patanjali makes mention of it (*kaya-sampat*) in the third chapter of the *Yoga Aphorisms* and Vivekananda, commenting on Patanjali, says that nothing can injure this body. 'Breaking the rod of time man lives in this universe with this body.' Echoes of this can be found in St. Paul's words: 'Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, which you received from God. Glorify God in your body and in your spirit which belongs to God' (Corinthians VI.19).

That St. John of the Cross, the prince among Spanish mystics, thought in the same way as Patanjali is evident from the parallels that we can establish between *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*, and the four 'Nights' of St. John. The 'Nights' are spiritual states of openness to God's Grace. The human 'lights' are extinguished and so they are called 'Nights'. But the divine 'lights' are on. In the language of Patanjali, *pratyahara* is stopping the outgoing tendencies of the mind by the conviction that all is inside; *dharana* is the choice of the symbol; *dhyana* is meditation, contemplation and *samadhi* is complete absorption in the Self where all subject-object relations are transcended.

The first 'Night' of St. John that prepares the Soul for grace is the night of the senses. All longing for sensuous things is withdrawn from sense objects and turned towards God. This has a resemblance to *pratyahara*. The second stage to union is by the 'Night' of understanding. I should stop all conceptualizations and imaginations so that God's Knowledge enters into me. I can do it only by Faith. Faith in God's action that transforms me into His Nature which is immanence and transcendence. This corresponds to *dharana*. The third step of St. John is purification of memory by hope and the fourth is purification of love by will, the two corresponding to *dhyana* and *samadhi*. What is real *dhyana*? Ramanuja replies that *dhyana* is *dhruva smriti*, constant memory of God, which means transformation of our memory into cosmic memory which is God's. What is *samadhi* if it is not complete fusion of my will and God's will with the conviction that 'my will is mine to make it Thine'. This is no passive submission but

enlargement into the Divine. Purification of love or Night of love by will may sound strange, but only until we understand the true meaning of *atma-samarpana*, complete Self-surrender, the last stage of the worship of the Divine. The Self is offered to the Divine, so that the Self becomes divine.

Jnana Yoga: 'I and my Father are one' is the declaration often quoted to substantiate Jesus' identity with God. The identity is put in evidence also in sentences which we used when we spoke earlier about *Bhakti Yoga*. Though couched in devotional language, the substance is *jnana*: 'My judgements are true, for I am not alone. The Father who sent me is with me' (John VIII.16). But what is supreme in a *jnani* is his power to transfer to another his *jnana* by his word and liberate him *here and now*. This power Jesus had. Witness for instance his declaration 'He who listens to my words and believes in Him who sent me *has* everlasting life' (St. John V.24). The accent is on *has*. He who hears is liberated here and now. Hearing in this context is by the heart and not through the ears.

Effort and Grace: Parallels

For the Christian the ineffable experience of Self-realization is accessible by human effort. But the profundity of God is purely a gracious gift from Him. It is not for man to raise himself by self-effort towards God, it is God who communicates to man His force and grace and gathers man to Him. Man can prepare himself for this double movement by a maturation of his faculties of love and intelligence. Receiving the gift of grace man can begin a new life of faith and charismatic-love.

According to Christian mysticism, Self-realization can be acquired by severe discipline. But God realization cannot be acquired. It is received in the soul, if the soul knows how to surrender herself completely.

Students of theistic Vedanta will find parallels in the *prapatti* idea of the Vishishta-Advaitins.

For the Advaita-Vedanta the certainty of the Self, in simple terms, the sentiment of being fully oneself is the first gift of God. The Lord says in the *Gita*: 'I am the Self in the heart of all beings' (X.20). For everybody this is not an accomplished fact. Man has to take up this divine promise and has to work his way up. The human self is the reflection of the Divine Self. This fact eggs man on to attain the original

of the reflection. On the road the 'bread of the journey' is furnished, as in the case of Christian mysticism, by Love and Knowledge. The giving up of all attachment is, as in Christianity, the imperative condition for realization. While Christianity insists on the gratuitous nature of grace, Vedanta glorifies the serenity and divine equanimity which the soul is heir to and which she can actualize by discipline. For the Hindu, grace, *prasada*, is the state of transluminosity which man can discover in himself every moment by the help of the four yogas, *Bhakti*, *Karma*, *Jnana* and *Raja*.

The Buddha and the Weaver's Daughter

A STORY

IN THE course of a long journey, the Buddha reached the town of Albinagar. The people of the town accorded him a respectful reception. He delivered a discourse there in which he gave the following advice:

'Our lives are as precarious as a drop of water on a lotus leaf. Death can come at any moment. Life is uncertain, but death is certain. There is no way to avoid death. In life's very nature which is changefulness, death will certainly appear. Therefore, remembering that the day of death will come, at all times think of death.'

That day the Buddha taught about remembering death. Those who make it a practice to think of death, who consciously keep the thought of death in their minds, even when they are young, whether rich or poor, they will not be susceptible to delusion. Discarding the sinful path of vice, they make progress in accomplishing meritorious deeds. Thousands of men and women in Albinagar heard that day's teaching. For a moment they perceived its meaning, but it could not endure in their minds which were burning with worldly desires. In the midst of a hundred kinds of work in the world they soon forgot that advice.

Amongst that gathering of people was a weaver's sixteen-year-old daughter. The holy Buddha's words made a deep impression on her mind. From sunrise to sunset she was busy with weaving and housework. There was no time for her to rest. Nevertheless, in the midst of all her work, her mind remained absorbed in this thought, as the

Buddha instructed, the thought of death. From within this thought came her experience of enlightenment. That is why, day after day, her mood of absorption became deeper.

When after three years the Buddha again went to Albinagar, bringing along his fifty disciples, the whole city was eager to give them a respectful reception. The news of the Buddha's coming also reached the ears of the weaver's daughter. In her heart she was anxious to see the Buddha but she was not free to move about as she would like and there was no way for her to avoid the pressure of her work. Nevertheless, her thoughts began to dwell upon seeing the Buddha and hearing his nectar-like words. Then her father called her and said:

'My dear, I am going to the shop for some work. But besides that I have promised a customer to weave a cloth today. A little of it remains to be done. When you finish it, go to the shop and give it to me.'

Hearing his words about this work that must be done, she was not at all happy; the Buddha's discourse was on her mind. But she had to obey her father so she could not think of going to the meeting. She knew what her father would do. Once aroused, his anger would not easily subside. She would receive on her tender body his slaps and punches. Therefore, she set to work to finish the remaining part of the cloth, and she began to think to herself that if she were fortunate she would be able to see the Buddha. Her hands began to move swiftly.

Crowds of men and women were gathered before the Buddha, eager to hear his teaching; their eyes remained fixed in the direction of the Buddha's face. The Buddha was silent. The assembly was also silent. That silence seemed to ring in the ears of all those gathered to listen. Elsewhere, the weaver's daughter finished weaving the cloth and, according to her father's command, put it in a basket to take it to him. With quick steps she set out on her way. After going along the road for some time she came to the outskirts of the city where she saw, in a vast open field, a huge gathering of people. In the middle of the assembly was the Buddha, seated on a dias. Seeing him, she felt completely overwhelmed with wonder at his beauty. The Buddha also, opening his eyes, looked at her face with a gaze full of affection and compassion. Setting down her basket, she approached the Buddha, and worshipping his holy feet, she stood just before him and looked up at his radiant, serene face. Breaking the silence of

the meeting, the Buddha asked her in a voice full of love,

'My dear child, where have you come from?'

The girl answered, 'Sir, I do not know.'

The Buddha asked again, 'My dear, where are you going?'

'Sir, I do not know that either.'

'Don't you *know*?'

'Sir, yes, I do *know*?'

'Do you know?'

'Sir, I do not know'.

The Buddha asked these four questions. The weaver's daughter answered them with a steady voice. But her answers sounded impertinent and arrogant to the ears of the people. From the crowd arose a low murmur of reproach. People began to say:

'See, the weaver's daughter is so rude; she says just what comes to her mind in answer to the questions of an enlightened holy man! How dare she! Humph! The little hussy, who does she think she is!'

The Buddha quieted the crowd and again asked the girl:

'My dear, when you were asked, "Where have you come from?", why did you say, "I do not know"? In answer, the girl said:

'Sir, you well know that I have come from a weaver's house—so that was not your question. That is why I answered that from where I have come to be born in a weaver's house—that I do not know.' In order to praise her intelligence the Buddha said:

'You answered my question correctly. It was that very answer that I wanted.'

The Buddha again asked, 'My dear, when I asked you where you were going, why did you say, "I do not know that either"?'

'Sir, where I am going, taking this cloth and thread in a basket—that could not be your question. That is why I said, "Departing from this place, where I will be born—that is unknown to me".'

'Excellent! My dear, you have given exactly the right answer.

The conversation then proceeded as follows:

The Buddha: 'My dear, when I asked you, "Don't you *know*?", then, why did you answer that you do *know*?'

Girl: 'That one day I will have to take leave of the bosom of this earth, in other words, that I will have to die, *that* I know: that is why, to those words, I answered that I do know.'

The Buddha: 'It was that very question that I asked you, and you gave the correct answer. Now, my dear, in answer to my last question, "Do you know?", why did you say, "I do not know"?'

Girl: 'Sir, certainly death will come, but what day, when, at what moment it will come, that is unknown to me. That is why I said, "I do not know".'

Even those in the audience who were learned were astonished to hear these revelations of thoughtful, mature wisdom from the girl's conversation. How wonderful was her depth of thought in spite of the fact that, in order to maintain herself, she worked hard from dawn till dusk! The audience began to stare at her with eyes full of praise. The Buddha commented:

'The real eye is the eye of knowledge! Those who do not have that eye are blind.' Again, by way of instruction, he said, 'In the world covered with darkness the number of people endowed with sight, free from the net, like birds, are few. It is they who attain the path of excellence.'

The girl found life's deep truth within this teaching. Her eyes were opened. The people assembled there were also benefited.

After the meeting dispersed, the field was empty. The girl took up her basket and went to her father. Her mind was filled with the Buddha's teaching. In that absorbed mood her habitually deep thought of death became deeper. Thinking single-mindedly, again and again, of the transitory nature of the world, she reached her destination. At the shop her father had stopped working on the loom and had fallen asleep in his seat while weaving. Without waking her father, she was very carefully putting down the basket when she stumbled and fell on the loom. The sound of her fall woke up her father who, with eyes dulled with sleep, as a matter of habit, started working the loom. Instantly the shuttlecock shot forward across the loom and stabbed his daughter in the chest. A jet of blood flowed from the wound onto the machine. Within a short time she fell upon the face of death. But on her own face there was no sign of pain. Even then, her face was radiant with deep peace.

Her father could not bear the heart-rending grief of his daughter's death by his own hand. From the pain of his grief he nearly became mad. Finally, he approached the Buddha who consoled him saying,

'The grief you have experienced in your past lives in this world, which is without beginning and which is eternally coming and going, is greater than the mass of water of the ocean in comparison with this drop of grief which you feel because of your daughter's death.'

Saying this, he gave priceless instructions in this regard. Those instructions touched the weaver deeply. He begged refuge at the feet of the Buddha and was accepted by him as a monk. His monk's life of austerity ultimately brought him spiritual realization. This great devotion of the weaver and his daughter to the Buddha's ideal is an inspiration to all spiritual aspirants.*

* From the *Pali Tripitaka*.

Gandhari

BELA BRAHMA

THE CULTURAL heritage of a nation unmistakably reflects the inherent strength of its people. In turn, a culture has an irresistible hold on its people's minds. When the culture is deeply spiritual it acquires an extraordinary power over them. That is why we find that the ancient traditional heritage of India has continued to survive through the passage of time and its inner vital force has permeated the warp and woof of the entire texture of Indian national life and has merged into its very being. A legacy of our glorious cultural heritage is the *Mahabharata*, the great epic of India and an immortal creation of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasadeva. It has faithfully interpreted the hopes and aspirations of the men and women of India and given vivid and eloquent expression to their ideals of life.

The wonderful assemblage of characters skilfully portrayed in the *Mahabharata* is entrancing but the character that excels many others and unobtrusively steals away everyone's heart is that of Gandhari, the much loved daughter of King Subala of Gandhara and the wife of King Dhritarashtra of Hastinapura. A careful study of Gandhari's character

Bela Brahma, an educator, is deeply devoted to the ideals of the Vedanta philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

shows Vyasadeva's deep appreciation of the noblest of human virtues. Conceived through his years of divine contemplation, they are significantly expressed in Gandhari with fascinating sensitiveness. The immortal poet has made her the epitome of all virtues that form the core of religion. His superb delineation of her luminous character reveals to us a woman who was ever attuned to dharma.* To her, religion was a living force, perennial and infallible, a formidable power that sustained the whole universe. She installed dharma in the golden niche of her heart as the presiding deity of her life, whose every dictate she obeyed with unflinching devotion, irrespective of its stern nature. That is why she could plead with King Dhritarashtra, could caution him when necessary, could warn and remonstrate with Duryodhana, reprove Yudhishthira and even Lord Krishna himself when necessary. Her unbounded vision and ascetic temperament made her heedless of the glitter of wealth and possessions and her loyal adherence to piety and righteousness made her a unique soul, towering far above common people. Her dharma led her to the 'straight gate and narrow way' to eternal life.

Gandhari's Marriage

King Subala of Gandhara received a proposal from Bhishmadeva of the Kaurava family asking for a marriage alliance between his nephew, Dhritarashtra, who was born blind, and King Subala's daughter. The King's immediate reaction to the proposal was full of misgivings. But after considering the glory and reputation of the Kaurava dynasty on the one hand, and the virtuous nature of his daughter on the other, he decided in favour of giving his daughter in marriage to Dhritarashtra. Gandhari heard that her parents had decided in favour of accepting the proposal to marry her to the blind prince. Immediately she took a piece of silk cloth, folded it many times and tied it round her eyes. Her sense of discrimination made her feel that it did not become the wife-to-be of a blind king to move about with open eyes.

Gandhari's entrance into the Kaurava dynasty as a daughter-in-law marked the beginning of a new purposeful chapter in her life. Her polite and discreet behaviour, her devoted service to her elders, her meticulous performance of household duties soon won the heart and admiration of everyone. She enlivened the ancient tradition of Indian

* नागधार्मिः धर्मजीवताम् ।

womanhood to achieve spiritual realization through the faithful performance of daily duties.

Gandhari Faces a Great Tragedy

There is a proverb: 'Incense does not emit its aroma unless it is burnt; a lamp does not shed its light unless it is lit'. Gandhari had to pass through severe tests to prove her worthiness to the world. A great tragedy was awaiting Gandhari to overshadow the happiness of her life. She became the mother of a hundred valorous sons but none came up to her expectations. Her eldest, Duryodhana, was vain, avaricious and extremely jealous of the fame, power and prosperity of the Pandavas who were his first cousins. Impelled by his crooked nature, Duryodhana went on scheming and finally struck upon a wily plan for the second time to deprive them of their lawful rights and privileges as royal princes. King Dhritarashtra was too indulgent a father to prevent him from taking recourse to dishonest means. In the beginning he did try to make him see sense through mild persuasion, saying if he wanted to surpass his cousins in any way he should try to be virtuous in thought and action. But ultimately he gave in to his son's insistence and invited his brother's sons to a mock game of dice to be played at Hastinapura with their cousins. The game started on the scheduled day in the royal court of Hastinapura. King Dhritarashtra could not suppress his feelings of jubilation at the successive defeats of the Pandavas at the hands of the Kauravas, but the pious Gandhari was heart-broken; her grief knew no bounds. Her conscience made her realize the urgent need of the hour. Gandhari with folded hands requested King Dhritarashtra not to agree to the malicious suggestion of his son to exile the Pandavas for fourteen years. Her farsighted vision made her see with amazing clarity the inevitable result: that the defeat of the Pandavas in the fraudulent game of dice would bring about complete annihilation of the Kaurava dynasty and would entail terrible human suffering. She repeatedly appealed to the King not to allow himself to be drowned in the ocean of endless misfortunes created by his own mistakes.* It was time for him to disown his son Duryodhana. But the warning was ignored by an overzealous father. The sternness of her request was too much for him.

In the capital of Hastinapura the Kauravas celebrated their triumph

* मा निवर्त्तनीः स्वदोषेण बहूप्यु त्वं हि जारत ।

with splendour and merriment. But Gandhari's alert mind was outraged at the impropriety of their action. Her words of advice at that hour to Bhanumati, her daughter-in-law, came from the depth of her conviction. They were the spontaneous outburst of a very discreet and sensitive mind. To accept victory with all modesty, and to nurture a feeling of oneness with the vanquished in the darkest hour of their humiliation could only be conceived by a person of Gandhari's stature. Her parting advice to Draupadi on the eve of her departure to the forest with her husbands was equally illuminating. The image of a devoted wife that Gandhari had faithfully projected in her personal life was a clear manifestation of her deep devotion to her husband; it testified to her sincerity of purpose, her intense dedication to dharma, rare to be found in the world.

The Pandavas came back from exile to regain their lost kingdom. King Dhritarashtra was in a dilemma. He was a bit apprehensive and half-inclined to return the kingdom to the Pandavas. But Duryodhana was as adamant as before. Realizing his own helplessness, Dhritarashtra, who was fully aware of Gandhari's sharp intellect and her high moral character, invited her to the royal court to talk to his inexorable son to make him change his mind.

On that occasion also Gandhari did not hesitate to remonstrate with Duryodhana in public. She told him that the excessive greed that was luring him to deceit and deception would prove extremely perilous and, finally, be the cause of his complete ruination. He would realize and repent at a time when it would be too late for him to do anything to assuage the grief of his parents. On the other hand, it would add to the great satisfaction of his enemies. Duryodhana disregarded the wisdom underlying her words; he remained relentless.

Gandhari was invited by King Dhritarashtra for the second time to the royal court when Lord Krishna himself came to Hastinapura to establish peace and amity amongst the warring cousins. She talked to Duryodhana with great affection, tried to convince him about the futility of going to war and dissuade him from taking that disastrous step. She told him explicitly that war could never be conducive to anything good or great, and victory could never be predicted.* Her invaluable advice proved ineffective; it failed to make a dent on Duryodhana's

* न वृद्धे रात्रिः कर्मणः न क्षम्यते कृतः शुभम् । न चापि विजयो नित्यं ना वृद्धे चेत् क्षम्यते ॥

unyielding mind, although it did leave an undying message for posterity.

Gandhari could visualize distinctly what was in store for her irreligious sons. Duryodhana's persistent and pathetic appeal to his mother to bless him to be victorious in the Kurukshetra war against the Pandavas could not move her from her ideal of dharma. Her mental vision remained unblurred. She was unvacillating in her conviction that 'where there was truth and righteousness there would be victory'.* Every day for the entire period of eighteen days of the Kurukshetra war she blessed her son by repeating this phrase which she believed to be infallibly true. The gripping beauty of the situation was extremely touching and, simultaneously, it displayed the magnanimity of her character.

Finally doomsday arrived. Duryodhana, the perpetrator of the Kurukshetra war, lost his life fighting against Bhima. But Yudhishthira, wise as he was, could not be happy over their victory; he was extremely worried about the repercussion the terrible news would have on Gandhari's mind. He approached Lord Krishna with all humility and requested him to kindly face grief-stricken Gandhari at Hastinapura and appease her anger by using his good offices. Lord Krishna went to Hastinapura at his entreaty to pacify Gandhari who was at that time immersed in profound grief. He reminded her that the Kurukshetra war had only justified her solemn prophecy and proved the veracity of her oft-repeated statement that 'where there is dharma there is victory'. It was not proper on her part to grieve or wish ill of the Pandavas. Gandhari listened to Lord Krishna's words and admitted that intense grief had upset her for a while. His consoling words calmed her down and she became her serene self again. But that did not prevent her from crying. The bereaved mother cried her heart out in the presence of Lord Krishna. This is the first instance in the *Mahabharata* when Gandhari is seen lamenting. Her momentary loss of self-control disclosed the intensity of the grief of a bereaved mother's heart. Her inner tranquility which had remained unperturbed so far, became disturbed. Her failing was but natural; it was most human and it made her appear glorious. It revealed how much the development of her innermost thoughts and sentiments had been perfected by spiritual discipline so that she could possess such tremendous control over her nature until that moment.

Though Gandhari's love and adoration for Lord Krishna was great,

* यतो धर्मस्ततो जयः ।

she could not forgive him for his inaction in the tragic drama where the Kauravas and the Pandavas were so intricately involved. In utter grief she cursed Lord Krishna to suffer the same fate as the unfortunate Kauravas and the Pandavas and that he would have an ignoble death in a faraway forest at the hands of an unknown assailant. The benign Lord Krishna gracefully accepted her curse on the Kurukshetra battlefield, which had become a veritable cremation ground. In his heart of hearts, he had felt the intensity of Gandhari's grief. His kind gesture in accepting her curse was an undeniable affirmation of Gandhari's greatness.

Gandhari once again became grief-stricken when she visited the Kurukshetra battlefield, with her blind, old, distressed husband and her widowed daughters-in-law. Agitated as she was, she was about to curse the Pandavas when Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasadeva himself appeared on the scene and forbade her to do so, saying: 'Let irreligion be defeated, and let there be victory where truth and righteousness prevail.'* His affectionate, persuasive words brought back peace to her disturbed mind. The light of knowledge dawned upon her again. The great Gandhari not only regained her usual composure, but standing on the battlefield, she was able to proclaim once again, 'Where there is truth there is victory'. Vyasadeva's Gandhari could never be unreasonable or found fallible even when she was in the throes of the greatest of misfortunes.

The Final Departure

King Dhritarashtra and Gandhari lived in the palace of Hastinapura under the affectionate care and protection of King Yudhisthira for fifteen long years after the Kurukshetra war. At last the old king felt an urge to leave the comfort of palace life and lead a life of complete renunciation in the faraway forests of the Himalayas. He consulted Vidura and Gandhari and they readily agreed to his proposal. Accordingly, all arrangements were made for their final departure. King Dhritarashtra addressed his subjects on the eve of his departure from Hastinapura, wished them well and begged their forgiveness for all the misdeeds of his greedy sons. That day also, the age-worn, blindfolded Gandhari was by her husband's side and joined him in his appeal.

On an auspicious day, King Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti, Vidura and Sanjay set out on their great march towards the Himalayan forests,

* अघर्मं जहि घर्मज्ञे यतो घर्मस्ततो जयः।

never to return. They walked miles and miles until they reached Vyasadeva's Ashrama. There Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasadeva graced them with his presence and kindly inquired about their welfare. Gandhari unburdened the secret of her heart to him—that it was painful for her to watch her old blind husband spending sleepless nights sighing and moaning over his dead sons as she had done for the last sixteen years. But she was so calm that she did not mention a word about her own grief. She heroically maintained this equanimity of mind till the last moment of her life. Beyond the range of her personality, beyond her manifold experiences of emotions and desires, she delved deep into the bliss of her inner world. One sees her blindfolded, silent and unperturbed, patiently seated by the side of her husband, offering herself as an oblation to the great conflagration about to engulf them in the Himalayan forests. It astounds one with its strange nobility. One is overwhelmed with inexpressible emotions, and one's mind imperceptibly rises to a higher plane. Thus she completed her life's *yajna* in her own inimitable way. She gave up her mortal life and in its stead achieved immortal greatness.

Women today would do well to dwell upon Gandhari's character, the greatness of which is essentially Indian, and that can certainly show them the way to profound wisdom to hold their own against the disintegrating forces that are challenging the present-day world.

What is the type of woman we most admire? Is she strong, resourceful, inspired, fit for moments of crisis? Have we not Padmini of Chitore, Chand Bibi, Jhansi Rani? Is she saintly, a poet, and a mystic? Is there not Meera Bai? Is she the queen, great in administration? Where is Rani Bhowani, where Ahalya Bai, where Janhavi of Mymensingh? Is it wifehood in which we deem that woman shines brightest? What of Sati, of Savitri, of the ever-glorious Sita? Is it in maidenhood? There is Uma. And where in all the womanhood of the world, shall be found another as grand as Gandhari?

Sister Nivedita

Brahma-Sutra-Bhashya of Sri Shankaracharya

M. R. YARDI

—4—

The Chatuhsutrl

SRI BADARAYANA tells us that the knowledge culminating in the realization of Brahman constitutes the highest aim of human life. He explains his approach to this important but intricate subject in the first four aphorisms of the *Brahma-Sutra* known as the *Chatuhsutrl*. Every worthwhile undertaking must start with a desire to do something, and the quest for Brahman is no different. Sri Badarayana, therefore, starts with an authoritative statement, 'Hence (one should entertain) a desire thereafter to know Brahman' (अथातो ब्रह्मविज्ञानात् 1.1.1). 'Hence' (अथ) connotes auspiciousness, commencement or subsequence. Sri Shankara observes that the word cannot mean auspiciousness here, as it cannot be connected syntactically with the purport of the *sutra*. But he adds that even if the word is used in some other sense, its very utterance sounds auspicious like the blowing of a conch. It does not connote commencement here, as no one can undertake this quest without adequate preparation. He then goes on to consider the view of an earlier commentator (possibly *vrttikara* Bodhayana). He seems to have held the view that 'thereafter' (अथः) here implies something done or practised earlier (पूर्वप्रकृत), but then Sri Shankara argues that it is not different from subsequence (आनन्तर्य). If this latter meaning is accepted, then one has to mention what these earlier things are, subsequent to which alone the search for Brahman can be undertaken.

What then is this prior condition for undertaking an inquiry into Brahman? Now an inquiry into religious duties appropriate for the different stages of life (अथर्वविज्ञानात्) is always dependent on the study of the Vedas. But the latter cannot be the prior condition for an 'inquiry into Brahman' (ब्रह्मविज्ञानात्), as it is a common factor in both cases. The question then arises whether ritual worship is a prerequisite for undertaking an inquiry into Brahman. According to Sri Badarayana all religious duties are helpful because there is an Upanishadic statement to this effect (III.iv.26). It is said in the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*,

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'The brahmins seek to know it by the repetition of the Vedas, by sacrifices, by offerings, by penance and by fasting'.¹ He, however, goes on to add in the next *sutra* that one must necessarily practise such means as self-control, as these are enjoined as internal aids (तदङ्गता) to knowledge. He bases this view on the next passage of the *Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad*, which says, 'One who knows thus, after becoming calm, subdued, quiet, patiently enduring and self-controlled, sees the Self in oneself'.² Sri Shankara agrees with this view, but adds that such means as religious rites are external to knowledge, being connected by the clause 'seeking to know', while such means as self-control are proximate to knowledge, being connected to knowledge by the clause 'one who knows thus'. He therefore holds that it is logically possible for a person who has studied the Upanishads to undertake an inquiry into Brahman without undertaking an inquiry into religious rites.

The word, अतः in the *sutra*, means 'hence' and so implies a reason. We see in this world that whatever is done or achieved (कृत) is artificial (कृतक) and so short-lived. The *Chandogya Upanishad* says that just as the enjoyable things earned through work get exhausted in this world, so also do the enjoyable things in the other world, which are earned through religious merit.³ 'Liberation, being an uncaused state, cannot be attained through works of religious merit (नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन)', says the *Mundaka Upanishad*.⁴ Sri Shankara therefore repeats over and over again that only the knowledge of Brahman leads to emancipation. According to him, conditions for undertaking an inquiry into this Brahman are (1) discrimination between the eternal and the non-eternal, (2) dispassion for the enjoyment of the fruits of works here and hereafter, (3) perfection in such spiritual practices as self-control and so on and (4) a hankering after liberation.

How can one apprehend this Brahman, which is said to be a proper object of human inquiry? The venerable aphorist explains this in the next three *sutras*. In his second *sutra* he says, '(Brahman is) that from which (arises) the birth etc. of this (universe)' (ब्रह्मावस्य यतः I.i.2). The word 'the birth etc.' (जन्मादि) is a *bahuvrihi* compound in which the subject is known along with its attributes. The suffix 'etc.' (आदि) implies birth, continuation and dissolution. This mention of birth first is in accordance with the nature of things and Upanishadic passages. As to the nature of things, only a thing which has come into existence by birth can have continuation and destruction. It is also in accord with

such Upanishadic passages as 'that from which beings take birth', and so on,⁵ where origination, continuation and dissolution are revealed in a sequence. By the word 'of this' (अस्य) is indicated the universe, the presence of which becomes known to us through our senses. Sri Shankara says that this universe, manifested to us through name and form, comprising as it does diverse agents and experiences and resting on actions and results based on such factors as space, time and causation, defies all attempts at the formulation of a theory of its creation. In this *sutra* the aphorist tells us that such a universe cannot possibly have its origin in any cause other than the omniscient and omnipotent Brahman.

Sri Shankara adds that we cannot possibly conceive of this universe as having its origin in Samkhya's Pradhana (primordial matter) or Vaisheshika's *anus* (atoms) or Buddhist's *abhava* (non-existence) or Hiranyagarbha (Brahma, the Creator born of the Golden Egg). The Naiyayikas, too, establish the existence of a personal God as distinguished from Brahman. The exponents of these philosophical systems base their theories on inference or reasoning and have arrived at conclusions which are contrary to those of the Vedanta. Sri Badarayana's aphorism, too, is based on reason, as it is presented in a syllogistic form giving the reason (*hetu*) for the origination of the universe. How then can one decide which of these theories is the valid one? The aphorist himself points out in his *sutra* II.1.11 that reasoning is an uncertain guide and lacks finality. The scientific method has solved this problem by subjecting every hypothesis set up on the basis of reasoning to verification by observation and controlled experiment. While these latter methods are not available in the spiritual field, yet it is possible to test the veracity of these theories by reference to the spiritual experiences of seers as embodied in the scriptures.

Sri Badarayana, therefore, states in his third *sutra*, '(Brahman as) the source (of the birth etc. of the universe) is also known from the scriptures' (सांख्ययोगिनाम् 1.1.3). Sri Shankara explains this by reference to the *Taittiriya Upanishad*.⁶ There it is stated that Bhrigu, the son of Varuna, approached his father and said, 'Teach me about Brahman, Sir'. His father said, 'Seek to know verily that whence beings are born, that by which when born they live, that into which on dying they enter. That is Brahman'. After performing austerities Bhrigu came to realize that 'Brahman is Bliss; for truly beings here are born from Bliss, when born

they live by Bliss, and on ceasing they enter Bliss'. We come across similar passages in the other Upanishads which state that the cause of the universe is, by nature, free, pure, eternal and omniscient.

The explanation given here is somewhat different from the one given by Sri Shankara. According to him both the second and the third *sutras* mean one and the same thing, as the very purpose of the *Brahma-Sutra* is to string together the Upanishadic passages relating to Brahman. If the second *sutra* itself tells us that Brahman is to be known from the scriptures, the question arises why the aphorist thought it necessary to add the third *sutra*. Sri Shankara himself raises this point and explains that since the second *sutra* did not expressly refer to the scriptures, the third *sutra* was added to eliminate any doubt on the point. It is, however, clear that if Sri Shankara's explanation is accepted, then either of these two *sutras* becomes redundant. On the other hand, Sri Badarayana himself has relied on both logic (*yukti*) and the scriptures (*Shruti*) in establishing his doctrines of Vedanta and refuting the doctrines of other systems.

The critics of scriptural authority now raise their heads and say, 'How can we acquire this definite knowledge of the cause of the universe, when the scriptures do not speak with one voice?' Sri Shankara admirably sums up their criticism in his comment on *sutra* I.iv.14. At some places, they say, we read of creation as starting from non-existence. For instance we read in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 'In the beginning there was verily non-existence, therefrom sprang existence'.⁷ The *Chandogya Upanishad* repeats the same thing: 'There was but non-existence in the beginning; that became existence and manifested itself'.⁸ But later we find that the same Upanishad refutes the theory of creation from non-existence and asserts creation from existence. For after stating the view of some who say that there was non-existence before creation, Uddalaka says to his son Shvetaketu, 'But how can this be so, my dear son? How can existence emerge out of non-existence? There was existence, to be sure, in the beginning'.⁹ At some other places, the creation of the world is stated to be spontaneous. For instance, we read in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 'In the beginning this was undifferentiated; the same became differentiated by name and form only'.¹⁰ In view of these conflicting opinions, they argue, it would be safer to rely upon reasoning and accept some other thing as the cause of the universe. To meet this criticism Sri

Badarayana presents his fourth *sutra*, 'This Brahman, however, (is known) from the harmonization (of differing scriptural statements)' (तत्तु सन्त्यवात् 1.1.4).

Sri Shankara, in his explanation of this *sutra*, says that all Upanishadic texts, when properly reconciled, speak of Brahman as the cause of the universe in perfect harmony. For instance, it is stated in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, 'In the beginning, my dear, this world was just existence (*sat*), one only without a second'. The *Altareya Upanishad* also asserts the same, 'In the beginning all this was *atman*, the Absolute Self, alone; there was nothing else whatever that winked'.¹¹ That this Brahman is a homogeneous entity is stressed in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 'This Brahman is without anything prior or posterior, without an inside or outside. This all-perceiving Self is Brahman'.¹² The *Mundaka Upanishad* also reiterates the same view, 'Brahman is verily this whole world, this widest existent'.¹³ In this way there is no disagreement among the Upanishadic texts which declare Brahman to be the cause of the universe.

In his comment on the same *sutra* 1.iv.14 Sri Shankara further states that divergent views are noticed in the case of creation, as sometimes it is said to start with space (*akasha*), sometimes with light (*tejas*) and so on. He adds, however, that the Master Badarayana will reconcile these differences starting with the *sutra* 11.iii.1. The point to be noticed here is that Sri Shankara uses the word 'will reconcile' (समा-वात्यति) from the verb 'to reconcile' (समावा). For instance, there are statements which distinguish the self from Brahman, such as, 'He then becomes united with Brahman'¹⁴ and 'the individual self in the body, presided over by the Omniscient Self'.¹⁵ On the other hand, we have the identity passage in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, 'Thou art That'.¹⁶ Sri Shankara reconciles these two differing views as follows: The notion of difference lasts so long as the *jiva*, the empirical self, is under the spell of ignorance (*avidya*), and identifies himself with his material adjuncts such as the body and the mind. On the attainment of knowledge, the *jiva* realizes his identity with Brahman.

It will be interesting to see how the *acharyas* of the different schools of Vedanta try to resolve this problem. Sri Bhaskara holds that both the identity and the difference are real and co-exist. Like the infinite space (*akasha*) enclosed in a jar (*ghatakasha*), the unconditioned Brahman exists, on account of His association with the material adjuncts

such as body and mind, as the individual self. In the state of knowledge, these adjuncts fall away and the self becomes identical with Brahman. According to Sri Ramanuja, the self has a distinct personality in the state of bondage as well as in the state of release. But as both the Self (*chit*) and matter (*achit*) form the body of the Lord, they cannot be said to be different from Him. In the state of liberation, the self realizes his sameness of nature (साधर्म्यं) with God and shares in the qualities of God except those of creation and superintendence of the world. According to Sri Nimbarka this identity—difference is not due to material adjuncts (शरीरादिक) as Sri Bhaskara holds, but is natural (स्वाभाविक). Brahman creates the world of the enjoyed (भोग्य) and the world of the enjoyer (भोक्तृ) by the natural manifestation of his powers. He, however, remains unchanged in his purity like the sun even as it sends out its rays and collects them back. On the other hand, Sri Madhva holds that the Self is not identical with Brahman in any way and so reads the identity passage differently as 'That is the Supreme Self, thou art not That, O Shvetaketu' (सः आत्मा अतत् त्वम् असि, श्वेतकेतो).¹⁷ Thus the Vedantists of other schools also try to reconcile such differences of views in Vedic passages somehow or other in conformity with their own theses.

It seems to me that the use of the word *samanvaya* by Sri Badarayana is specifically intended to exclude such attempts at reconciliation of the Upanishadic passages which are at variance with one another. In what sense then is this 'harmonization' different from 'reconciliation' as explained above? In this connection it would be instructive to understand the principle of harmonious construction which is followed by jurists in the interpretation of different statutes. According to this principle a construction which would leave without effect any part of the language of a statute would normally be rejected. Applying this principle to the interpretation of the Vedic passages, one has to ensure that an Upanishadic passage must not be construed in such a way as to nullify another passage or make it redundant. It is on the basis of this principle of harmonization that Sri Badarayana harmonizes the *bheda-abheda* passages in the Upanishads in his *sutra* II.i.22, where he says 'Brahman is greater (than the self), because of the assertion of difference'. Thus according to him, although the self and Brahman are essentially of the same nature, Brahman is greater than the self in those attributes in which It excels, namely Its innate knowledge and

power, (स्वाभाविकी ज्ञानबलश्रिया च).¹⁸ The approach of Sri Badarayana is to harmonize the differing passages in the Upanishads to arrive at a coherent system of Upanishadic philosophy.

References

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A Parable Interpreted

R. DAS

ONCE A fisherwoman was a guest in a gardener's house. She was asked to sleep in a room full of flowers. But she couldn't get any sleep there. She was restless and began to toss about. The gardener called her, 'Hello there! Why aren't you asleep?' 'Oh I don't know,' said the fisherwoman. 'There are flowers here. The fragrance keeps me awake. Can you give me my fish-basket?' She sprinkled a little water on the basket and when she smelled the fish she fell fast asleep.

Sri Ramakrishna

Freedom from Conditioning

Man is conditioned by environment, local, social and natural. However unpleasant it may seem to an outsider, man gets used to his particular environment and dislikes the very idea of a change. There is a story that an old Chinese was confined in a dark prison cell for sixty years, at the end of which he was set free. But when he came out of the prison he cried, 'I can't bear so much light! I can't bear so much light!' He begged the jailer, 'Either you kill me or send me back to my

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cell'. At long last the jailer agreed and the man returned to the dark and stifling but familiar environment of his cell.

Man is also conditioned by his own mind and body or, more correctly, by his ego. It is the ego that generates attachment to his body, to wealth, power and even to scholarship and learning. The urge to acquire these worldly possessions grows ever more powerful so that man comes under the spell of lust, greed and tension. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna, he is a *baddha jiva* or a soul that is bound. He is like a fish caught in a fisherman's net, trying not to escape but to bury itself deeper in the mud within the net. He is like the fisherwoman in the above parable, conditioned to living with a fishy smell and unwilling to accept the infinitely superior scent of flowers. Such is the state of an average man.

Why does the fisherwoman not respond to the flowers or the better environment? Western psychology says that as a result of interaction between hereditary and environmental factors, a human being develops some behaviour patterns within which he is conditioned. The fisherwoman is conditioned to the fishy environment and she therefore does not like to change it. Further, it is not easy for her to change her behaviour pattern because it has developed as a result of her past actions. If she is determined to do so she can, but it would require a repeated and loving stimulus from outside. The stimulating agent should make her aware of the value of her new environment and convince her that it is better than her old one. If she is convinced, she will be motivated to introduce a change. She will thus overcome her aversion to the new environment and gradually break the old habit pattern.

In this parable, the fish basket has been compared with sense objects or worldly pleasures and the scent of flowers with spiritual living. An ordinary man fails to respond to a higher spiritual life because he is already conditioned to a life of worldly pain and pleasure. Like the fisherwoman he also needs an external stimulus to make him aware of his nature which is divine and to convince him that a longing for *mukti* is far superior to the desire for material enjoyment. This stimulating agent is the company of holy people or the illumined guru who has realized God. It is only the lighted candle that can kindle other candles.

Sri Ramakrishna narrates a story to illustrate how an external stimulus is necessary to awaken the spiritual consciousness lying dormant within the individual.

Once a tigress attacked a flock of sheep. The shepherd shot her, but immediately before her death she gave birth to a cub. This cub grew up in the company of the sheep. It learnt to eat grass and even to bleat like them. After a few months, a tiger attacked the same flock and saw, to his surprise, that the cub behaved exactly like a lamb, to the extent that it ran away in fear along with the lambs. The tiger jumped at the cub, dragged it to some water and made it see its own reflection. 'Don't you see the similarity between your face and mine?', said the tiger to the cub. On seeing its reflection in the water, the cub understood its real nature and it followed the tiger into the forest.

Hindu psychology generally agrees with western schools of thought in the belief that the aversion of a man to new surroundings can be overcome by a stimulating agent which develops in him a new motivation for change. But it differs widely in its explanation of the working of man's subconscious mind. According to the Hindu belief, man's mind is a storehouse of impressions, not only of this life but also of previous lives. These are known as *samskaras* and they determine his tastes, drives and character. In other words, man is conditioned by these *samskaras*.

To explain the power of these *samskaras*, Sri Ramakrishna tells us an amusing story. 'A prince had, in a previous birth, been the son of a washerman. While playing with his chums in his incarnation as a prince, he said to them, "Stop playing these games. I will show you a new one. I shall lie on my belly and you will beat the clothes on my back as the washerman does, making a swishing sound."'

Can man get rid of the accumulated evil impressions of the mind or the baser *samskaras* which are obstacles to spiritual life and which make the individual forgetful of his divine nature? Hindu psychology says that he has to remove them from the very root by stamping counter impressions on his mind. As Swami Vivekananda says, 'The only remedy for bad habits is counter habits; all the bad habits that have left their impressions are to be controlled by good habits. Go on doing good, thinking holy thoughts continuously; that is the only way to suppress base impressions. . . . Character is repeated habits, and repeated habits alone can reform character.'

In the Hindu terminology, the whole process of filling the mind with good impressions in order to get rid of baser tendencies or to be released from the conditioned life, is called *sadhana*. But again, due

to his past *samskaras*, the individual does not like to practice *sadhana*, nor has he any aspiration for a higher spiritual life. However, if by the grace of God he comes into contact with an illumined preceptor, he receives a spiritual impulse from him, which creates in him a faith in the superiority of spiritual life to worldly life. This faith develops in him an aspiration for a divine life and a yearning for God-realization. Blessed with this faith and love, he practises with sincerity, patience and devotion the spiritual disciplines prescribed by his guru. He also develops an attitude of detachment towards worldly objects. Thus he progresses rapidly along the spiritual path.

Of course persons with extremely bad *samskaras* do not feel any spiritual urge even in the holy company of illumined souls. Sri Ramakrishna used to call them 'wet sapwood', which required much drying before it could be burnt. He said, 'Realization is not for them in this birth.' Perhaps they require many experiences of worldly pain and pleasure before they can turn Godward. But ultimately, in a future life, they must get spiritual illumination because, as Narada says in his *Bhakti Sutra*, the effect of contact with a great soul is infallible.

However, this *sadhana* when practised by an aspiring soul helps him to substitute his past *samskaras* by new, noble and holy ones. But to root out all *samskaras*, both good and evil, is not such an easy job. The *Katha Upanishad* says, 'Like the sharp edge of a razor is the spiritual path—difficult to cross and hard to tread'. But a determined effort to practise spiritual disciplines evokes the grace of God, which ultimately leads man to freedom—freedom from all bondage, a release from all conditioning. As Shankaracharya says: 'With the mind restrained in *samadhi*, behold in yourself the *atman* of infinite glory, cut off your bondage which is strengthened by the impressions of previous lives. With care, try to attain the fulfilment of your human birth.'

*The mind is like white linen just returned from the laundry.
It takes on the colour you dip it in.*

Sri Ramakrishna