



# REACH

Newsletter of Vedanta Centres of Australia

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Motto:

*Atmano mokshartham  
jagad hitaya cha,*

**“For one’s own  
liberation and for the  
welfare of the world.”**

## Sayings and Teachings

### Direct yourself towards God

“The magnetic needle always points to the North, and hence it is that the sailing vessel does not lose her direction. So long as the heart of man is directed towards God, he cannot be lost in the ocean of worldliness.”

--- Sri Ramakrishna

*Great sayings: Words of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda; The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture; Kolkata; pages 3-4.*

### Egoism causes suffering

“People suffer endless miseries on account of their egoism and at last they say, ‘Not I, not I; it is Thou, O God! It is Thou!’”

--- Sri Sarada Devi

*Sri Sarada Devi: The Holy Mother: Life and Teachings by Swami Tapasyananda; Sri Ramakrishna Math; Chennai, page 114.*

### Faith uplifts

“Faith, faith, faith in ourselves, faith, faith in God—this is the secret of greatness. If you have faith in all the three hundred and thirty millions of your mythological Gods, and in all the Gods which foreigners have now and again introduced into your midst, and still have no faith in yourselves, there is no salvation for you. Have faith in yourselves, and stand up on that faith and be strong; that is what we need.”

--- Swami Vivekananda.

*Teachings of Swami Vivekananda; Advaita Ashrama; Kolkata, page 65.*



**Images of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi at the Ramakrishna Math, Jayrambati, Bankura, and the Divine Mother Durga at Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math, Howrah, W. B. India**

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS FROM OCTOBER 2011 TO JANUARY 2012

Function	Centre	Date
Durga Puja	Brisbane	Friday, 7 October 2011
	Sydney	Tuesday, 4 October 2011
Birth Anniversary of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi	Brisbane	Sunday, 1 January 2012
	Melbourne	Saturday, 24 December 2011
	Perth	Saturday, 17 December 2011
	Sydney	Saturday, 17 December 2011
Birth Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda	Brisbane	Saturday, 4 February 2012
	Melbourne	Saturday, 28 January 2012
	Perth	Saturday, 21 January 2012
	Sydney	Saturday, 21 January 2012

### Welcome

We welcome you all to the Ramakrishna - Vedanta Movement and invite you to attend our functions and actively participate in the propagation of the Universal message of Vedanta as epitomized in the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda.



# News from and activities of the Vedanta Centres of Australia and New Zealand

For the period from June 2011 to September 2011

## ADELAIDE CENTRE

### Monthly activities:

a) Swami Sridharananda continued his three-days-a-month visit to Adelaide and delivered **discourses** on the *Bhagavad Gitā* and *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* at the Dulwich Community Centre, 14 Union Street, Dulwich SA 5065. The lectures are being recorded. For details of the ongoing monthly programmes please contact Mr. Raman Sharma, Secretary, on 08-8431 9775 or Mrs. Pathma Iswaran on 08-8379 5336.

b) A 'Reading from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*' was held every month on a prescheduled Sunday at 2:30 p.m. at 33 Woodhouse Crescent, Wattle Park, SA 5066.

c) A **group study** was held every fortnight on 'The Concept of Karma Yoga' based on the video of *Bhagavad Gitā* Chapter 2 while Swamiji was away in the U.S.

### Other activities:

a) The **Annual General Meeting** of the Adelaide Vedanta Chapter was held on Thursday, July 14, 2011 at the Dulwich Community Centre.

## BRISBANE CENTRE

### Daily activities:

Morning worship, evening *ārati*,

*bhajans*, and readings from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* are the regular activities at the Centre at 181 Burbong Street, Chapel Hill, QLD 4073, (Phone no. 07-3720 0228). A resident volunteer looks after the day-to-day activities at the Centre.

### Monthly activities:

Swami Atmeshananda visited Brisbane once a month and delivered talks on the *Bhagavad-Gitā* and on other spiritual topics.

### Other activities:

a) The General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, **Swami Prabhananda**, visited Brisbane from the 18th to the 20th of July 2011. He was accorded an official reception to Australia on the 19th of July when the Swami spoke on 'the Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna'. He also visited Springfield and saw the proposed centre to be built there.

b) Some places in Australia new to the message of Vedanta eagerly received these ideas. The groups of devotees of these places that hosted talks were:-

1) **Townsville:** Swami Atmeshananda visited the place on the 11th and 15th of September and held talks there.

2) **Gladstone:** The Central Queensland

University sponsored a talk by Swami Atmeshananda on 'Spirituality in daily life' on the 9th September 2011. Prof. Gopinath Chattopadhyaya organised the meeting.

3) **Rockhampton:** Local devotees organised a talk by Swami Atmeshananda on the 10th of September 2011 at the Central Queensland University.

c) A **picnic** was organised on the 18th of September 2011 at a park in Springfield near the proposed new site for the Vedanta Centre.

**Swami Prabhananda, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission at the Brisbane airport on 18th July 2011.**



Swami Prabhananda delivering a talk, Mr. Mahalingam welcoming him and the audience in prayer after the talk



Swami Atmeshananda addressing devotees in Gladstone (left) and Rockhampton (centre) and the Picnic in Springfield (right)



## CANBERRA CENTRE

Swami Sridharananda conducted **classes** on the *Bhagavad-Gitā* twice a month at the Majura Community Centre in Canberra. He also gave parlour talks based on the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* once a month. Contacts: Mr. J. Venkataraman, Secretary - 02-6258 7612 and Dr. Ian Doherty, Treasurer - 02-6247 8519.

## MELBOURNE CENTRE

### Daily Activities:

Vesper service is held daily from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Centre at 7 Judy Court, Vermont, Vic 3133. It includes set hymns, scriptural readings, meditation and occasional devotional singing.

A **bookstall** containing literature on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, Vedanta philosophy, and other spiritual topics in print, audio, and visual media was made available throughout the period. For further information please contact Mr. Suresh Ravinutala, Secretary, on 03-9803 6154 or Mr. Mohana Krishnan on 03-9801 6174.

### Weekly/Monthly Activities:

a) Swami Sridharananda continued to deliver monthly **discourses** on the *Bhagavad-Gitā* from Thursday to Saturday of a prescheduled week at Monash University Clayton Campus of Law, Wellington Road (L. Theatre L1). The Thursday and Friday sessions were from 7:45 p.m. to 8:45 p.m. and the sessions on Saturdays were from 11 a.m. to 12 noon. The recordings of these discourses are available in Audio, Video and MP3 formats.

b) **Prayer Meetings** were conducted on the first Sunday of every month, from 5 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. these included prayer, recitation of sacred mantras, singing of *kirtan* and *bhajans*, followed

by selected readings from the scriptures and discussions on them by the participants. The meetings concluded with *ārati* and the distribution of *prasād*.

c) A **Group study** on *Bhagavad-Gitā* continued every alternate Sunday from 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m.

d) **Group study** sessions through video viewing of the *Mundaka Upanishad* lecture series was held every Sunday from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* lecture series every Friday from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

### Celebrations:

a) A prayer meeting was held on the occasion of **Guru Purnimā** on 15th of July 2011.

### Other Activities:

a) The General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, **Swami Prabhananda** visited the centre on 30th of July 2011. He reached at about 7:30 p.m. on 30<sup>th</sup> and delivered a talk on 'The Charm of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.' He left for Perth in the morning on 31st of July. Swamis Atmeshananda and Mahabodhananda, (from Kolkata, India), accompanied him.

b) The Centre conducted its **Annual General Meeting** on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2011 at Monash University Clayton campus. The annual accounts have been passed and future plans/activities were discussed. The AGM has also nominated its Committee members for the next 2 years.

## PERTH CENTRE

### Daily Activities:

The Centre located at 51 Golf View Street, Yokine W.A. 6060 holds vesper

service daily at 7 p.m. with *ārati*, readings from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, and meditation. A resident volunteer does the morning services. The Centre maintains a small **book-stall** and a **library**. Contacts: Mr. Unni Krishnan - Secretary - 0430 391 369, Mr. K.P. Basu Mallick Joint Secretary - 0422 370 066.

### Monthly Activities:

a) Swami Sridharananda visited the Centre every month from Thursday to Saturday on prescheduled weeks and conducted **discourses** on *Bhagavad-Gitā*. About 50 devotees attended the discourses on an average.

b) Monthly **satsang** which includes the singing of *Bhajans* and reading from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and other inspiring books were conducted on the first Sunday of every month from 11 a.m. to 12 p.m.

### Other activities:

a) The General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, **Swami Prabhananda** visited the centre from 31st of July to 2nd of August 2011. He delivered a talk on 'The Unique Motherhood of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi.' Swamis Sridharananda, Atmeshananda and Mahabodhananda accompanied him. He was given a warm send off on 2nd of August.

b) Swami Chandrashekaranda visited the Centre from 21st to 27th of September 2011. He conducted a session on Meditation on 24<sup>th</sup> of September from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. and gave a talk on 'The Importance of the Worship of the Divine Mother' on 25<sup>th</sup> of September from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. During his stay he also conducted daily *ārati*, singing of *bhajans* and *satsang* based of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.



Swami Prabhananda visited the Perth Centre



The book-stall





The Guru Purnima celebration (Inset Swami Damodarananda).



Swami Prabhananda was welcomed at the Sydney Airport and a group photo with him at the Sydney Centre

## SYDNEY CENTRE

### Daily Activities:

At 2 Stewart Street, Ermington, chanting, daily worship and meditation are held every morning from 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. The vesper service starting at 7 p.m. in the evening includes devotional singing and a reading from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Counselling, interviews and discussions with devotees are also conducted on a daily basis. The library is available to devotees for reference and research. The Centre maintains a bookstall which has a range of books

on the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, Vedanta, Yoga, and other spiritual literature. Devotional songs, discourses on *Srimad-Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, *Mundaka Upanisad*, and other topics are also available in various media.

### Weekly/ Monthly Activities:

The Centre conducted the following activities in Sydney:

a) Swami Sridharananda conducted classes on the *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gītā* every Sunday morning from 9:45 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. at the Centre. Swami Damodarananda gave talks on

spiritual subjects during the absence of Swami Sridharananda.

b) Classes on *Srimad-Bhagavad Gītā* were also conducted by Swami Sridharananda at 1 Edwin Street, Fairlight, **Manly Beach** on Tuesdays from 7:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

c) Some devotees availed **spiritual counselling** and guidance. The Swamis also visited the homes of devotees when required.

d) **Meditation** sessions were held at the Centre on Sundays from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m.



The worship of Mother Earth (Bhumi Pujan)



Children's Camp July 2011



e) Classes on **Sanskrit language** were held from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. and from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. on Saturdays and from 2:30 p.m. to 3:45 p.m. on Sundays for various levels of adult students.

f) **Bala Sangha** Classes on **moral** and **spiritual** lessons were conducted for children every Saturday from 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the Centre. Following these, **drama and movement** classes were held until 6:45 p.m.

g) Two **Children's Retreats** of three days each were organised from the 5th to 7th of July and from 27th to 29th September 2011. Around 40-50 children tasted the flavor of these spiritual camps on each occasions. Mantra recitation, Yoga, clay modeling, craft and other activities were organized to stimulate the creativity of children.

h) Classes on **moral** and **spiritual** lessons were also conducted for children on Wednesdays from 9:15 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. at Carlingford West Primary School and Eastwood Public School during the academic term.

i) The Centre provided **English Language tutoring** to students on Tuesdays from 5:30 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. during the school term.

#### Celebrations:

a) **Guru Purnimā** was celebrated on 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2011 after *ārati* with

Bhajans and a short formal worship. Swamis Damodarananda and Sridharananda gave talks on the significance of the Guru and the day.

b) **Krishna Janmashtami** was celebrated on Monday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2011. The programme started after arati with bhajans, a formal worship and a reading from *Srimad-Bhāgavatam*. On Sunday the 21st of July, the participants of the Bala Sangha presented a skit on 'The Birth of Sri Krishna'.

#### Other Activities:

a) The General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, **Swami Prabhananda** visited the centre from 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2011. He officiated the **Bhumi Pujan**, the worship of Mother Earth, at the place where the future shrine cum multipurpose hall is to be built. After the worship of Sri Ramakrishna he delivered a lecture on '**The charm of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.**'

b) A bookstall was organised on 14th of August 2011 at the India Australia Friendship Fair in Olympic Park.

#### Overseas Visit:

a) Swami Sridharananda visited Auckland, New Zealand from 11th to 18th of June 2011. He had to stay beyond the planned schedule because of the eruption of volcanic ash.

b) Swami Sridharananda visited Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 20th to 26th of July 2011 on an invitation from the Lincoln College, K.L. He attended an international seminar and delivered few talks on spiritual subjects.

c) On invitation he also visited U.S.A. and Canada from 12th of August to 1st of October 2011. He visited many places of U.S. and Canada.

#### Visiting Monastic:

Swami Tadananda of Fiji Centre visited the Centre from 25th of August to 1st of September 2011.

#### AUCKLAND CENTRE

#### Daily activities:

A vesper service is held daily from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Centre at 27 Arawa Street, New Lynn, Auckland. It includes singing of hymns, readings from the text *Portait of Sri Ramakrishna* and meditation.

#### Monthly and annual activities:

a) On the **second Sunday** of every month *satsang* programmes, which include singing of *Bhajans*, discourse on the *Ramayana*, reading and discussion about the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and meditation were conducted from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

b) On the **last Sunday** of every month reading and discussion on *Srimad-Bhagavad Gitā*, the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the life and



Swami Prabhananda delivering talk at the Auckland Centre

teachings of Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda were conducted. In addition to the above music and chanting classes were also held on these days.

c) Swami Sridharananda conducted *Srimad-Bhagavad Gitā* classes from 11th to 15th of June 2011.

#### Celebrations:

a) **Guru Purnima** was celebrated on 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2011. The programme started with *Bhajans* after the *ārati*

at 8 p.m. Devotees talked about Guru and his relevance in spiritual life.

b) **Krishna Janmashtami** was celebrated on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2011. The programme started at 8 p.m. after arati and ended at 9 p.m. Kirtans, readings from *Srimad Bhāgavatam* and *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* on Sri Krishna were the highlights of the programme.

#### Other Activities:

a) **Swami Prabhananda**, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, visited the centre from 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> of July 2011. On 26<sup>th</sup> July 2011, he delivered a lecture on 'Sri Ramakrishna's Ideal for the Present Age.' Swami Chandrashekarand from Sydney Centre and Swami Mahabodhananda from Belur Math, India, accompanied him.

### MANAGING COMMITTEES OF VEDANTA CENTRE OF SYDNEY AND OTHER CHAPTERS

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## Discourses on Jnana-Yoga by Swami Vivekananda

(Continued from last edition of Reach)

Jnana teaches that the world should be given up, but not on that account to be abandoned. To be *in* the world, but not *of* it, is the true test of the Sannyasin. This idea of renunciation has been in some form common to nearly all religions. Jnana demands that we look upon all alike, that we only see “sameness.” Praise and blame, good and bad, even heat and cold, must be equally acceptable to us. In India there are many holy men of whom this is literally true. They wander on the snow-clad heights of the Himalayas or over the burning desert sands, entirely unclothed and apparently entirely unconscious of any difference in temperature.

We have first of all to give up this superstition of body; we are not the body. Next must go the further superstition that we are mind. We are not mind; it is but the “silken body”, not any part of the soul. The mere word “body”, applied to nearly all things, includes something common among all bodies. This is *existence*. Our bodies are symbols of thought behind, and the thoughts themselves are in their turn symbols of something behind them, that is, the one Real Existence, the Soul of our soul, the Self of the universe, the Life of our life, our true Self. As long as we believe ourselves to be even the least different from God, fear remains with us; but when we know ourselves to be the One, fear goes; of what can we be afraid? By sheer force of will the Jnani rises above body, beyond mind, making this universe zero. Thus he destroys Avidya and knows his true Self, the Atman. Happiness and misery are only in the senses, they cannot touch our real Self. The soul is beyond time, space and causality—therefore unlimited, omnipresent.

The Jnani has to come out of all forms, to get beyond all rules and books, and be his own book. Bound by forms, we crystallise and die. Still the Jnani must never condemn those who cannot yet rise above forms. He must never even think of another, “I am holier than thou.”

### Marks of the true Jnani

These are the marks of the true Jnana-Yogi:



Swami Vivekananda

(1) He desires nothing, save to know. (2) All his senses are under perfect restraint; he suffers everything without murmuring, equally content if his bed be the bare ground under the open sky, or if he is lodged in the king's palace. He shuns no suffering, he stands and bears it - he has given up all but the Self. (3) He knows that all but the One is unreal. (4) He has an intense desire for freedom. With a strong will, he fixes his mind on higher things and so attains to peace. If we know not peace, what are we more than the brutes? He does everything for others—for the Lord—giving up all fruits of work and looking for no result, either here or hereafter. What can the universe give us more than our own soul? Possessing that, we possess *all*. The Vedas teach that the Atman, or Self, is the One Undivided Existence. It is beyond mind, memory, thought, or even consciousness as we know it. From it are all things. It is that through which (or because of which) we see, hear, feel, and think. The goal of the universe is to realise oneness with the “Om” or the One Existence. The Jnani has to be free from all forms; he is neither a Hindu, a Buddhist, nor a Christian, but he is all three. All action is renounced, given up to the Lord; then no action has power to bind. The Jnani is a tremendous rationalist; he denies everything. He tells himself

day and night, “There are no beliefs, no sacred words, no heaven, no hell, no creed, no church—there is only the Atman.” When everything has been thrown away until what cannot be thrown away is reached, that is the Self. The Jnani takes nothing for granted; he analyses by pure reason and force of will, until he reaches Nirvana which is the extinction of all relativity. No description or even conception of this state is possible. Jnana is never to be judged by any earthly result. Be not like the vulture which soars almost beyond sight, but which is ever ready to swoop downwards at the sight of a bit of carrion. Ask not for healing or longevity, or prosperity, ask only to be free.

### “Existence, Knowledge and Bliss”

We are “Existence, Knowledge, Bliss” (Sachchidananda). Existence is the last generalisation in the universe; so we exist, we know it; and bliss is the natural result of existence without alloy. Now and then we know a moment of supreme bliss, when we ask nothing, give nothing, and know nothing but bliss. Then it passes and we again see the panorama of the universe going on before us and we know it is but a “mosaic work set upon God, who is the background of all things”. When we return to earth and see the Absolute as relative, we see Satchchidananda as Trinity—Father, Son, Holy Ghost. Sat=the creating principle; Chit=the guiding principle; Ananda=the realising principle, which joins us again to the One. No one can know “existence” (Sat) except through “knowledge” (Chit), and hence the force of the saying of Jesus, No man can see the Father save through the Son. The Vedanta teaches that Nirvana can be attained here and now, that we do not have to wait for death to reach it. Nirvana is the realisation of the Self, and after having once, if only for an instant, known this, never again can one be deluded by the mirage of personality. Having eyes, we must see the apparent; but all the time we know it for what it is, we have found out its true nature. It is the “screen” that hides the Self which is unchanging. The screen opens and we find the Self

behind it-all change is in the screen. In the saint the screen is thin and the Reality can almost shine through; but in the sinner it is thick, and we are apt to lose sight of the truth that the Atman is there, as well as behind the saint.

All reasoning ends only in finding Unity; so we first use analysis, then synthesis. In the world of science, the forces are gradually narrowed down in the search for one underlying force. When physical science can perfectly grasp the final unity, it will have reached an end, for reaching unity we find rest. Knowledge is final.

Religion, the most precious of all sciences, long ago discovered that final unity, to reach which is the object of Jnana-Yoga. There is but one Self in the universe, of which all lower selves are but manifestations. The Self, however, is infinitely more than all of its manifestations. All is the Self or Brahman. The saint, the sinner, the lamb, the tiger, even the murderer, as far as they have any reality, can be nothing else, because there is nothing else. *"That which exists is One, sages call It variously."* Nothing can be higher than this knowledge and in those purified by Yoga it comes in flashes to the soul. The more one has been purified and prepared by Yoga and meditation, the clearer are these flashes of realisation.

### **The concrete vs. abstract**

The higher understanding is extremely difficult. The concrete is more to most people than the abstract. As an illustration of this, a story is told of two men in Bombay—one a Hindu and the other a Jain – were playing chess in the house of a rich merchant of Bombay. The house was near the sea, the game long; the ebb and flow of the tide under the balcony where they sat attracted the attention of the players. One explained it by a legend that the gods in their play threw the water into a great pit and then threw it out again. The other said; No, the gods draw it up to the top of a high mountain to use it, and then when they have done with it, they throw it down again. A young student present began to laugh at them and said, "Do you not know that the attraction of the moon causes the tides?" At this both men turned on him in a fury and inquired if he thought they were fools. Did he suppose that they believed the moon had any ropes to pull up the

tides, or that it could reach so far? They utterly refused to accept any such foolish explanation. At this juncture the host entered the room and was appealed to by both the parties. He was an educated man and of course knew the truth, but seeing plainly the impossibility of making the chess-players understand it, he made a sign to the student and then proceeded to give an explanation of the tides that proved eminently satisfactory to his ignorant hearers. "You must know", he told them, "that afar off in the middle of the ocean, there is a huge mountain of sponge – you have both seen sponge and know what I mean. This mountain of sponge absorbs a great deal of the water and then the sea falls; by and by the gods come down and dance on the mountain and their weight squeezes all the water out and the sea rises again. This, gentlemen, is the cause of the tides, and you can easily see for yourselves how reasonable and simple is this explanation." The two men who ridiculed the powers of the moon to cause the tides, found nothing incredible in a mountain of sponge, danced upon by the gods! The gods were real to them, and they had actually seen sponge; what was more likely than their joint effect upon the sea!

### **'Comfort' is no test of truth**

'Comfort' is no test of truth; on the contrary, truth is often far from being 'comfortable'. If one intends to really find truth, one must not cling to comfort. It is hard to let all go, but the Jnani *must* do it. He must become pure, kill out all desires and cease to identify himself with the body. Then and then only, the higher truth can shine in his soul. Sacrifice is necessary and this immolation of the lower self is the underlying truth that has made sacrifice a part of all religions. All the propitiatory offerings to the gods were but dimly understood types of the only sacrifice that is of any real value, the surrender of the apparent self, through which alone we can realise the higher Self, the Atman. The Jnani must not try to preserve the body, nor even wish to do so. He must be strong and follow truth, though the universe fall. Those who follow fads can never do this. It is a life-work, nay, the work of a hundred lives! Only the few dare to realise the God within, to renounce heaven and Personal God and all hope of reward.

A firm will is needed to do this; to be even vacillating is a sign of tremendous weakness. Man always *is* perfect, or he could never become so; but he had to realise it. If man were bound by external causes, he could only be mortal. Immortality can only be true of the unconditioned. Nothing can act on the Atman – the other ideas are pure delusion; but man must identify himself with that, not with body or mind. Let him know that he is the witness of the universe, then he can enjoy the beauty of the wonderful panorama passing before him. Let him even tell himself, "I am the universe. I am Brahman." When man *really* identifies himself with the One, the Atman, everything is possible to him and all matters become his servants. As Sri Ramakrishna has said, 'After the butter is churned, it can be put in water or milk and will never mix with either;' so when man has once realised the Self, he can no more be contaminated by the world.

The first step upwards is when we recognise ourselves as the children of God; the last step is when we realise ourselves as the One, the Atman.

### **Thought is all important**

Thought is all important, for "what we think we become." There was once a Sannyasin, a holy man, who sat under a tree and taught the people. He drank milk, and ate only fruit, and made endless 'Pranayamas', and felt himself to be holy. In the same village lived an evil woman. Every day the Sannyasin warned her that her wickedness would lead her to hell. The poor woman, unable to change her method of life which was her only means of livelihood, was still much moved by the terrible future depicted by the Sannyasin. She wept and prayed to the Lord, begging Him to forgive her because she could not help herself. By and by both the holy man and the evil woman died. The angels came and bore her to heaven, while the demons claimed the soul of the Sannyasin. "Why is this?" he exclaimed, "have I not lived a most holy life, and preached holiness to everybody? Why should I be taken to hell while this wicked woman is taken to heaven?" "Because," answered the demons, "while she was forced to commit unholy acts, her mind was always fixed on the Lord and she sought deliverance,



which has now come to her. But you, on the contrary, while you performed only holy acts, had your mind always fixed on the wickedness of others. You saw only sin, and thought only of sin, so now you have to go to that place where only sin is.”

The moral of the story is obvious: The outer life avails little. The heart must be pure and the pure heart sees only good, never evil. We must never try to be guardians of mankind or to stand on a pedestal as saints reforming sinners. Let us rather purify ourselves and the result must be that in so doing we shall help others.

### **Real Knowing ‘Vijnana’ and bliss**

There are two ends or aims of human life, real knowing (Vijnana) and bliss. Without freedom, these two are impossible. They are the touchstone of all life. We should feel the Eternal Unity so much that we should weep for all sinners, knowing that it is we who are sinning. The eternal law is self-sacrifice, not self-assertion. What self to assert when all is one? There are no ‘rights’, all is love. Selflessness only, not selfishness can solve the question. The idea of ‘right’ is a limitation; there is really no ‘mine’ and ‘thine’, for I am thou and thou art I. We have ‘responsibility’, not ‘rights’. We should say, “I am the universe”, not “I am John” or “I am Mary.” These limitations are all delusions and are what holds us in bondage, for as soon as I think “I am John”, I want exclusive possession of certain things and begin to say “me and mine”, and continually make new distinctions in so doing. So our bondage goes on increasing with every fresh distinction, and we get further and further away from the central Unity, the undivided Infinite. There is only one Individual, and each one of us is That. Oneness alone is love and fearlessness; separation leads us to hatred and fear. Oneness fulfils the law. Here, on earth, we strive to enclose little spaces and exclude outsiders, but we cannot do that in the sky, though that is what sectarian religion tries to do when it says, “Only *this* way leads to salvation, all others are wrong.” Our aim should be to wipe out these little enclosures to widen the boundaries until they are lost sight of, and to realise that all religions lead to God. This little puny self must be sacrificed. This is the truth symbolised by baptism into a

new life, the death of the old man, the birth of the new – the perishing of the false self, the realisation of the Atman, the one Self of the universe.

### **Karma Kanda and Jnana Kanda**

The two great divisions of the Vedas are Karma-Kanda—the portion pertaining to doing or work, and Jnana-Kanda—the portion treating of knowing, true knowledge. In the Vedas we can find the whole process of the growth of religious ideas. This is because when a higher truth was reached, the lower perception that led to it, was still preserved. This was done because the sages realised that the world of creation being external, there would always be those who needed the first steps to knowledge, that the highest philosophy, while open to all, could never be grasped by all.

All external forms of prayer and worship are included in the Karma-Kanda. These are good when performed in a spirit of unselfishness and not allowed to degenerate into mere formality. They purify the heart. The Karma-Yogi wants everyone to be saved before himself. His only salvation is to help others to salvation. “To serve Krishna’s servants is the highest worship.” One great saint prayed, “Let me go to hell with the sins of the whole world, but let the world be saved.” This true worship leads to intense self-sacrifice. It is told of one sage that he was willing to give all his virtues to his dog, that it might go to heaven, because it had long been faithful to him, while he himself was content to go to hell.

The Jnana Kanda teaches that knowledge alone can save, in other words, that he must become “wise unto salvation”. Knowledge is first objective, the Knower knowing Himself. The Self, the only subject, is in manifestation seeking only to know Itself. The better the mirror, the better reflection it can give; so man is the best mirror, and the purer the man, the more clearly he can reflect God. Man makes the mistake of separating himself from God and identifying himself with the body. This mistake arises through Maya, which is not exactly delusion but might be said to be seeing the real as something else and not as it is. This identifying of ourselves with the body leads to inequality, which inevitably leads to struggle and jealousy, and so long as we

see inequality, we can never know happiness. “Ignorance and inequality are the two sources of all misery”, says Jnana.

When man has been sufficiently buffeted by the world, he awakes to a desire for freedom; and searching for means of escape from the dreary round of earthly existence, he seeks knowledge, learns what he really is, and is free. After that he looks at the world as a huge machine, but takes good care to keep his fingers out of the wheels. Duty ceases for him who is free; what power can constrain the free being? He does good, because it is his nature, not because any fancied duty commands it. This does not apply to those who are still in the bondage of the senses. Only for him, who has transcended the lower self, is this freedom. He stands on his own soul, obeys no law; he is free and perfect. He has undone the old superstitions and got out of the wheel. Nature is but the mirror of our own selves. There is a limit to the working power of human beings, but no limit to desire; so we strive to get hold of the working powers of others and enjoy the fruits of their labours, escaping work ourselves. Inventing machinery to work for us can never increase well-being, for in gratifying desire, we only find it, and then we want more and more without end. Dying, still filled with ungratified desire, we have to be born again and again in the vain search for satisfaction. “Eight millions of bodies have we had, before we reached the human”, says the Hindus. Jnana says, “Kill desire and so get rid of it.” That is the only way. Cast out all causation and realise the Atman. Only freedom can produce true morality. If there were only an endless chain of cause and effect, Nirvana could not be. It is extinction of the seeming self, bound by this chain. That is what constitutes freedom, to get beyond causality.

### **A little plant to a huge tree**

Our true nature is good, it is free, the pure being that can never be or do wrong. When we read God with our eyes and minds, we call Him this or that; but in reality there is but One, all variations are our interpretations of that One. We *become* nothing; we *regain* our true Self. Buddha’s summary of misery as the outcome of ‘ignorance

and caste' (inequality) has been adopted by the Vedantists, because it is the best ever made. It manifests the wonderful insight of this greatest among men. Let us then be brave and sincere: whatever path we follow with devotion, must take us to freedom. Once lay hold of one link of the chain and the whole must come after it by degrees. Water the root of the tree and the whole tree is watered. It is of little advantage to waste time to water each leaf. In other words, seek the Lord and getting Him we get all. Churches, doctrines, forms – these are merely the hedges to protect the tender plant of religion; but later on they must all be broken down, that the little plant may become a tree. So the various religious sects, Bibles, Vedas, and scriptures are just 'tubs' for the little plant; but it has to get out of the tub and fill the world.

We must learn to feel ourselves as much in the sun, in the stars, as here. Spirit is beyond all time and space; every eye seeing is my eye; every mouth praising the Lord is my mouth; every sinner is I. We are confined nowhere, we are not body. The universe is our body. We are just the pure crystal reflecting all, but itself ever the same. We are magicians waving magic wands and creating scenes before us at will, but we have to go behind appearances and know the Self. This world is like water in a kettle, beginning to boil; first a bubble comes, then another, then many until all is in ebullition and passes away in steam. The great teachers are like the bubbles as they begin – here one, there one; but in the end every creature has to be a bubble and escape. Creation, ever new, will bring new water and go through the process all over again.

### **Happiness and misery are chains**

Both happiness and misery are chains, one golden, the other iron; but both are equally strong to bind us and hold us back from realising our true nature. The Atman knows neither happiness nor misery. These are merely 'states', and states must ever change. The nature of the soul is bliss and peace unchanging. We have not to *get* it; we *have* it; let us wash away the dross from our eyes and see it. We must stand ever on the Self and look with perfect calmness upon all the panorama of the world. It is but baby's play and ought never to disturb us. If the mind is pleased by

praise, it will be pained by blame. All pleasures of the senses or even of the mind are evanescent, but within ourselves is the one true unrelated pleasure, dependent on nothing outside. 'The pleasure of the Self is what the world calls religion.' The more our bliss is within, the more spiritual we are. Let us not depend upon the world for pleasure.

Some poor fishwives, overtaken by a violent storm, found refuge in the garden of a rich man. He received them kindly, fed them, and left them to rest in a summer-house, surrounded by exquisite flowers which filled all the air with their rich perfume. The women lay down in this sweet-smelling paradise, but could not sleep. They missed something out of their lives and could not be happy without it. At last one of the women arose and went to the place where they had left their fish baskets, brought them to the summer-house, and then once more happy in the familiar smell, they were all soon sound asleep.

Let not the world be our 'fish-basket' which we have to depend upon for enjoyment. This is *Tāmasika*, or being bound by the lowest of the three qualities (or *Gunas*). Next higher come the egotistical who talk always about 'I', 'I'. Sometimes they do good work and may become spiritual. These are *Rājasika* or active. Highest comes the introspective nature (*Sāttvika*), those who live only in the Self. These three qualities are in every human being in varying proportions, and different ones predominant at different times. We must strive to overcome Tamas with Rajas and then to submerge both in Sattva.

Creation is not the 'making' of something, it is the struggle to regain equilibrium, as when atoms of cork are thrown to the bottom of a pail of water; they rush to the top singly and in clusters, and when all have reached the top and equilibrium has been regained, all motion or 'life' ceases.

### **Conclusion**

Knowledge exists eternally. The man who discovers a spiritual truth is what we call 'inspired', and what he brings to the world is revelation. But revelation too is eternal and is not to be crystallised as final and then blindly followed.

Revelation may come to any man who has fitted himself to receive it. Perfect purity is the most essential thing, for only 'the pure in heart shall see God.' Man is the highest being that exists and this is the greatest world, for here can man realise freedom. The highest concept we can have of God is man. Every attribute we give Him belongs also to man, only in a lesser degree. When we rise higher and want to get out of this concept of God, we have to get out of the body, out of mind and imagination, and leave this world out of sight. When we rise to be the absolute, we are no longer in the world – all is Subject, without object. Man is the 'apex' of the only 'world' we can ever know. Those who have attained 'sameness' or perfection, are said to be 'living in God.' All hatred is 'killing the self by the self'; therefore, love is the law of life. To rise to this is to be perfect; but the more 'perfect' we are, the less work can we do. The *Sāttvika* see and know that all this world is mere child's play and do not trouble themselves about that. We are not much disturbed when we see two puppies fighting and biting each other. We know it is not a serious matter. The perfect one knows that this world is Maya. Life is called Samsara - it is the result of the conflicting forces acting upon us. Materialism says, "The voice of freedom is a delusion." Idealism says, "The voice that tells of bondage is but a dream." Vedanta says, "We are free and not free at the same time." That means that we are never free on the earthly plane, but ever free on the spiritual side. The Self is beyond both freedom and bondage. We *are* Brahman, we *are* immortal knowledge beyond the senses, we *are* Bliss Absolute.

### **Source:**

*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*; Mayavati Memorial Edition; Volume VIII; Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, pages 9-35.

If you think that you are bound, you remain bound; you make your own bondage. If you know that you are free, you are free this moment. This is knowledge, knowledge of freedom. Freedom is the goal of all nature.

As long as we believe ourselves to be even the least different from God, fear remains with us; but when we know ourselves to be the One, fear goes; of what can we be afraid?

- - - Swami Vivekananda.



## The Charm of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna

This is a transcript of the Talk given by Swami Prabhananda, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission at the Vedanta Centre of Sydney, Ermington on the 30th of July 2011.

Revered Swami Sridharanandaji,  
Revered Swami Damodaranandaji,  
other Swamis and Brahmacharis of the  
Ramakrishna Order, and dear devotees;

I am really very happy to be present here on this occasion. I was simply charmed to listen to the history of the Ramakrishna movement in Australia, that has already taken a very good shape. All that was said about the Ramakrishna movement in Sydney is very encouraging. But I am a bit embarrassed by what was said about me! I think of myself as the servant of the servants of the Ramakrishna Mission. That is how I would like to think about myself.

I have been asked to give a talk on ‘**The Charm of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.**’ This particular book on spirituality occupies a very distinguished place in spiritual field for various reasons. It is the English rendering of the five volumes of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* authored by Sri Mahendranath Gupta (M), a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. It is very interesting history. I had the good fortune of reading through most of the diaries that he maintained at that time and I learnt a lot from those diaries and I could place some of those unpublished materials and ideas in the form of books.

Today the subject that is chosen, namely, the charm of the Gospel is something that has practically attracted me from my young days. I have tried to go deep into the ideas contained in the book but I don’t claim that I have understood all of it. There are certain words that have such deep meaning, that I would not like to claim that I have totally understood them and so is true with all of the Kathamrita or the Gospel.

### Acclamation received

As regards this wonderful book, let me quote from a very interesting commentator. He writes: “This school-master who modestly signs himself as M loved his teacher so deeply that he would sit in his little room after sun set every day, and write down everything from his memory – everything that



Swami Prabhananda speaking at the Vedanta Centre of Sydney

had been said by the Master, his disciples and guests, sometimes from morning till evening.” The result is an extraordinary achievement which Aldous Huxley called—“the greatest piece of hagiographic literature in the world; full of lively parables, lucid explanations of different spiritual matters and dazzling accounts of mystical union. If you take this book, and start reading, I do not think you would want to part from it”; Such tributes have been paid by many scholars all over the world. The book is available in many languages now, and it is becoming increasingly popular. Now we shall try to understand as to what this Gospel is.

### M. a reporter

The most important thing is that M never claimed that he was the author of this book. He repeatedly said that he was nothing but a reporter and he tried to be a sincere reporter of what he had seen, and what he had understood of what he had seen, and tried to report as sincerely as possible. It is in fact, a brief report, of the mission and vision of the great man, the great spiritual teacher Sri Ramakrishna.

### Period covered

M met Sri Ramakrishna on one Sunday sometime in the month of March 1882. But we find that the literature covers the period from the 1st of January 1881 right up to the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1887, though Sri Ramakrishna passed away on 16<sup>th</sup> of August 1886. If we analyse this we find that direct reporting about Sri Ramakrishna is from the period from one Sunday in March 1882 to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1886. The reporting covers 181 days.

There is a prologue for the period from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1881 and also an epilogue that reports up to the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1887.

### Source and disclosure

The best parts of the materials are from M’s memories and also diaries of some other reliable devotees. It is very interesting to note that when he started publishing the text, - first of all in English and then in Bengali. He was very hesitant to publish, but circumstances practically compelled him to come forward and disclose what he had collected privately. M considered the diary that he was maintaining was private because earlier on one occasion Girish Chandra Ghosh wanted to peep into it and M immediately said “this is for my private consumption and not for others”. He had no idea or intention of publishing these materials. However, this is a long story, and he finally wrote those five volumes in Bengali.

In the introduction to the fourth volume he mentioned that he had materials with him and he wanted to make use of them to write another four to five volumes and thereafter he would write a biography of Sri Ramakrishna. Unfortunately he could not fulfill this plan of his. Even when the Holy Mother repeatedly insisted that he was becoming old so he should give to the posterity whatever he had already collected. But unfortunately he could not complete this task.

### A symbol

A logo or a symbol that is generally designed and used by an organization

as its emblem. The picture that we find as the logo used by M is very interesting. It describes the mental condition, rather the overall condition of Sri Ramakrishna that has been described by Swami Saradananda by using a new term uncommon in Bengali called '*Bhāvamukha*'. This word, Sri Ramakrishna heard from the Divine Mother. He received commands from the Divine Mother three times and he was asked to stay in that *Bhāvamukha* condition. It is a condition that is very interesting. Interested readers are referred to an article on this by Swami Tapasyananda Maharaj, explaining what *Bhāvamukha* is. In brief, it is a state of mind when a person is at the border between the world of senses and the remaining part of the world or world of super-sensual state. In the Gospel we find that on the 24th of August 1882, Sri Ramakrishna told M. —“the mind of a Yogi is always fixed on God, always absorbed in the Self. You can recognize such a man by merely looking at him. His eyes are wide open with an aimless look like the eyes of a mother bird hatching her eggs. Her entire mind is fixed on the eggs and there is a vacant look in her eyes. “Can you show me such a picture” asked Sri Ramakrishna. M promised to show him such a picture but unfortunately, he could not do so. But later, I found from M’s own collections, that he had collected a beautiful coloured picture and that can be found on the cover of Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita in Bengali. It would be nice if this picture is used in the translations of the book in English and other languages. It is a very significant picture. It depicts a person who is in that state of mind.

#### **From Indrawn to the world Mission**

If we read the Gospel carefully, we find that on the very first day when M entered into the room of Sri Ramakrishna with the permission of a maid-servant Binde, he found Sri Ramakrishna in a state that was quite unknown to him. On other occasions also Sri Ramakrishna often wanted to talk, but his mind dived deep into something else and he could not even talk or express clearly what he wanted to say. And afterwards Sri Ramakrishna himself made a comment that this state is called '*Ardha-bāhyadashā*' meaning half conscious and half unconscious state of mind. This is a state which according to Chaitanya Charitamrita, was one of

the states of mind of Sri Chaitanya. From this period onwards till the end, Sri Ramakrishna was in that state.

But we find, there was a little difference later as something happened in the last part of January in 1884. He met with an accident and had a fracture. There is a beautiful description: when the doctor was making a bandage for him and was trying to give him treatment, from that time onwards he was in a different spiritual mood. He was being advised regularly by the Divine Mother, as he was in regular communion with Her, that it was now time for him to come down to a lower level and try to communicate with the common people. This is a very important period. This is the period about which there is a beautiful description in *the Great Master* by Swami Saradananda. He wrote about one day when very interesting incident happened. When Sri Ramakrishna was discussing about the important aspects of the teachings of Sri Chaitanyadeva, he mentioned about worshipping Jiva (living being) as Shiva (God) which impressed Narendranath (later Swami Vivekananda) very much. And he promised that he would try to spread this wonderful message when he would get the opportunity. And this is in fact, how the Ramakrishna Mission came into existence.

#### **The Master and a Householder**

The Gospel narrates the story of Sri Ramakrishna. Along with that, if you read carefully, you will find that it also narrates the story of a frustrated householder – that is Mr Mahendranath Gupta, who coming in contact with Sri Ramakrishna, not only received a new lease of life, but evolved into an ascetic householder, a model for others to follow. M was a very qualified person and had the best education and career among all of Sri Ramakrishna’s disciples. He had won lots of laurels and he was a very successful teacher and headmaster. But unfortunately his family life was not happy one. He suffered a lot. So much so that one day he decided to commit suicide. This is a long story. I shall not go into the details here. Circumstances forced M to take shelter that very day at a friend, Ishan Kaviraj’s place. The next day was a Sunday. M in the company of a neighbor went to Dakshineswar. They went around looking at several beautiful garden-

houses in that area and then they went to Rani Rashmani’s garden. That was the popular name of Dakshineswar in those days. And there he met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time. That was the beginning.

#### **An Ascetic Householder**

It is very interesting to note in the unpublished materials that a few days after his first meeting with the Master, M approached the Master for permission from him to commit suicide. Because M found that it was very difficult to reconcile with the over all situation that he was in. And Sri Ramakrishna said; “Already you have been selected and you have been given an opportunity. So don’t even think of it.” Thereafter, I found from the unpublished material that M had made two attempts to give up his householder’s life to become a monk. Sri Ramakrishna did not permit either. Sri Ramakrishna had a plan for M - to make him an ideal householder. In the Bengali version there is a term for this—'*Grihastha Sanyāsi*'. It directly translates into ‘ascetic householder’. So Sri Ramakrishna gradually helped him to come out of his problems, and as a result, he gradually transformed himself into an ascetic householder.

#### **Various Aspects of M**

It is interesting, that while I was studying the Gospel one day, I found another perspective in a flash. It dawned on me that the Gospel was not only the story and the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna but also an autobiography of M. In the Bengali Gospel M tried to hide himself by using many pseudonyms; I could count as many as eleven. Of these he frequently used 4 pseudonyms to describe himself: In some places he described himself as ‘Master’ (a teacher), in some places as ‘*Bhakta*’ (a devotee), in other places as ‘*Mohini*’, and in some other places ‘*Mani*’. In fact, they are the four aspects of the wonderful personality of M. You will find that ‘Master’ is a general description of a successful teacher, an honorable person fond of his pupils, and always ready to help them to come up. And when he describes himself or hides himself behind the name ‘*Bhakta*’ – he means the *Bhakta* who is battered in the worldly life: he is meek, always eager to find a solution to the immediate problem that he is facing. And *Mohini* is a typical lower



middle class Bengali householder. His wife had lost her son and also lost her mental balance. And he had to face that situation. Mani is the most important aspect of his personality. Mani is a philosopher, a poet, an artist, and also a man of independent spirit.

### **An Autobiography**

If you study the *Kathāmrita*, you find that M appears in different names in the pages of the Gospel so very frequently that he becomes the second most important person next to Sri Ramakrishna. When I discovered that, I continued my study of the Gospel from that perspective. And I found it was a wonderful autobiography. And I have written about this in many of my articles.

### **The Gospel's popularity**

When he started writing this book, he first wrote in English. There were protests in several journals, particularly in *Tattva Manjari*, saying that since Sri Ramakrishna's mother-tongue was Bengali and his Bengali had a special flavour, the author must make use of the language of Sri Ramakrishna. M conceded to that. Interestingly, when he started writing in Bengali he did not use the name '*Sri Ramakrishna Kathāmrita*'. He used the expression '*Sri Ramakrishna Lilāmrita*'. A few installments were published under this title. Later on he changed it. Thereafter he came across the beautiful verse '*Tava kathāmrutam, Taptajeevanam, ....*' in the *Bhagavatam*. He then started using this expression and called the title of the book as *Sri Ramakrishna Kathāmrita*. I have not come across any piece of Bengali literature where sections of a book have been published so widely as this book, in fact it was published in as many as 17 Bengali journals at that time. In those days, the Brahmo movement was going on and they were publishing so many journals: some of them were monthly, others were fortnightly, etc. Besides this I have not come across any other case, where the same article was published in four journals simultaneously. This is indeed a rare occurrence.

### **M's Transformation**

The study of this book is very helpful for all of us. If you study the book from the stand-point of M's life you will find how a frustrated young man gradually transformed himself into an ascetic-householder - an ideal householder. So much so that Sri Ramakrishna

now gave him permission and also instructions that he must now take care of young people who were recommended by him or whoever approaches him for spiritual instruction. This is something wonderful.

### **The Gospel's Exactitude and now-ness**

You will always find, that he has tried very sincerely to place before the readers what he had heard and what he had understood. A number of great scholars have pointed out that the most important characteristic of this literature is the exactitude, which is something wonderful. A great scholar and Nobel Laureate, Christopher Isherwood, has tried to explain this particular characteristic by the quality of 'now-ness'. You will find that what is happening—happening right now in front of you. If you read the Gospel carefully, you will experience that Sri Ramakrishna is standing by your side, or some times he is musing a song and you are listening to a part of it. It is an immediate experience. That is something that attracts many people like me.

### **A Spiritual Guidebook**

There is another important idea in this book from the standpoint of spirituality. This Gospel is an ideal spiritual guide for all sincere God-seekers. Different people have explained or interpreted the Master's words in different ways. From the standpoint of Vedanta, some people said that Sri Ramakrishna was not at all an Advaita-vedantist. But he was following the middle path followed by Ramanujacharya – *Vishishtā-advaita* – qualified monism.

### **Give up the world**

Whatever standpoint one may take to understand Sri Ramakrishna, it should conform his teachings. Let us try to understand the viewpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and it is this: Sri Ramakrishna's Vedanta advises man to 'give up the world'. The term 'give up the world' has to be understood in the proper perspective. When the world is given up, what does it mean? What remains after giving up the world? It is only God who remains. By this statement Sri Ramakrishna meant that you can have your wife, or your family. When he said to give up your wife does not mean you have to abandon her; but you have to see God in the wife. To give up the children means to see God in the children. The Vedanta that Sri

Ramakrishna preached is give up the world that you have conjectured. Because your conjecture is based on partial understanding of the world, upon very poor reasoning and upon your many weaknesses. In the language of the Upanishads Sri Ramakrishna advises you to deify the world. The famous Ishopanishad in the very first verse says - "*Ishāvāsyam idam Sarvam, Yat Kincha Jagatyām Jagat*", it means that you are to cover the whole universe with this idea that it is nothing but God appearing in various ways. This is one point.

It may prove to be very difficult for many of us to follow and to accept this path. For them the Gospel offers a second alternative advice. Here Sri Ramakrishna says; "Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all your beloved ones: wife, father, mother, children and serve them sincerely. Feed them as if they are very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you, they belong to God." Sri Ramakrishna explains this by giving an example of a maid-servant in a rich man's house. On the same occasion he gives the example of a tortoise that had laid its eggs on the shore. And though the tortoise is now moving in the river, its mind is fixed on those eggs lying on the shore. This is the second alternative. As far as M was concerned, M himself followed the second path. So much so that a question was raised: whether M was representing Sri Ramakrishna in proper perspective because Swami Vivekananda has preached Sri Ramakrishna as one of the greatest *Advaitins*. But here M was preaching Sri Ramakrishna as a *Vishishtā-advaitin* – qualified monist.

### **Various understanding**

A great scholar like Pramadas Mitra who was stationed in Varanasi, and a great friend of the Ramakrishna order of monks challenged M's presentation of Sri Ramakrishna. These are expressed in a number of letters which are not yet published. In those letters Pramadas Mitra challenged M stating; "how do you say that Sri Ramakrishna was a *Vishishtā-advaitin*?" M replied saying; "I have presented Sri Ramakrishna as I have understood him. I don't claim that I have understood him fully." This is something wonderful. Whenever we write about some person, actually we try to present our understanding of

that person. We are not actually able to paint that particular character as he is. On this point M was correct. He went on defending himself about these and other similar charges from others as well. He kept insisting that he was sincerely following what Sri Ramakrishna had made him understand and he had followed it sincerely and he had presented his understanding.

The book presents a number of discussions that took place among the direct disciples. If we read carefully, we notice that those days at Baranagore Math, there were several occasions where the disciples discussed the significance of certain teachings of the Master. One day, Latu Maharaj, Swami Adbhutananda, did not accept one of Swami Vivekananda's statements. But Swami Vivekananda went on defending himself with reasoning. Latu Maharaj finally reconciled to this saying that, Thakur (the Master) wanted every one of us to understand him in our own ways and that is the way we have understood him. Therefore, the understanding of all the disciples, though they have many points in common, cannot be equated. This is an interesting aspect of the Gospel, which many scholars and philosophers have discussed and concurred on.

### **Solution lies beneath the Problem**

Before I conclude, I want to present one more point. After all what is the significance of the Gospel, particularly to us the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna? There is an interesting incident recorded in the Gospel itself. This is my humble interpretation of what I have understood of that incident, not that M has mentioned it clearly.

One day Sri Ramakrishna was discussing some aspects about dream and its significance in the life. He suddenly asked M, "Do you see dreams?" M replied, "Yes, the other day I saw an interesting dream". This discussion happened on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1882. Remember M met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time in the month of March 1882. Therefore, this discussion took place a few months after his first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna. M continued, "The other day I had a strange dream. I saw the whole world enveloped in water. There was water on all sides. A few boats were visible, but suddenly huge waves appeared and sank them. I was about to board a ship along with a few others when we

saw a Brahmin walking over the expanse of water. I asked him, "How can you walk over the deep?" The Brahmin said with a smile, "Oh! There is no difficulty about that as there is a bridge under the water". I said to him "Where are you going?" The Brahmin replied, "to Bhanavipur – the city of the Divine Mother". Then M shouted, "wait a bit, I cried, -I shall accompany you". Then the Brahmin said, "Well I am in a hurry, it will take you time to get out of the boat, Good Bye! Remember this path and come after me".

This particular story seems very significant to us. If we read the Gospel, and if we contemplate on the theme, every one according to his own need and understanding will understand the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. And if we are sincere every one of us will be rewarded with something wonderful and will find answers from the teachings that we need. This is something that I have realized.

I took up some pieces of his teachings and discussed in detail with several others. And I found that every one was satisfied in finding an answer to his own problem from his own perspective. In the same situation, Sri Ramakrishna did not give the same solution to every one. We have to be sincere and find out the meaning. But we must have the faith that there is a bridge underneath the water surface. For every one of us there is a solution. If we have this faith, then we shall be able to make use of this wonderful advice that Sri Ramakrishna gave us.

### **Faith and Reason are complementary**

In this connection, I studied the *Kathāmrita* to have an understanding of how the transformation came in the life of M. I found that one of the big problems of people like M who undergo college education, is that they have a big problem in reconciling between faith and reasoning. And this is an important issue. If we read the Gospel carefully, we finally find how M finally resolved this issue. There was a problem for him. Sri Ramakrishna insisted that one must be reasonable and one must not simply follow anything that someone says. Some times he even questioned Narendranath in whom he had great faith. One day, he saw a bird and Narendranath described the bird as *Chataka* – a bird that depends only on rain water. Sri

Ramakrishna said, "You are mistaken, and hence forth I am not going to accept whatever you say." You must have an open mind. How to have reconciliation between faith and reasoning? It is a part of spiritual discipline that every one of us have to practice. With practice and deeper understanding, over a period of time, we will find that this problem becomes easier to resolve. Whenever I think about it, it is something wonderful and the charm of the Gospel never fails to amaze me. On this subject I can talk for days together as I enjoy this subject immensely. I wish you also enjoy the Gospel. Make use of the Gospel for guiding your personal life in different situations and you have to find out solutions for yourself. Always have faith that there is a solution just underneath the troubles on the surface that we face in life. So we should be a little careful

With these few words, I heartily thank all of you for giving me a patient hearing. I am so happy that so many of you have come to the fold of Sri Ramakrishna, in the sense that you have found out about Sri Ramakrishna. I hear so many interesting stories of how people came to know about Sri Ramakrishna. I share that we are all fortunate to have found him and let us look up to him more and more as we progress on this spiritual path. He is here to guide us.

Thank you all.

### **A letter from Swami Vivekananda**

My dear M.,

Many many thanks for your second leaflet. It is indeed wonderful. The move is quite original and never was the life of a great teacher brought before the public untarnished by the writer's mind as you are doing.

The language is also beyond all praise so fresh, so pointed and withal so plain and easy.

I cannot express in adequate terms how I have enjoyed them. I am really in a transport when I read them. Strange, isn't it? Our teacher and Lord was so original and each one of us will have to be original or nothing. I now understand why none of us attempted his life before. It has been reserved for you, this great work. He is evidently with you.

With love and namaskara.

Yours in the Lord,  
Vivekananda.



## **Sri Ramakrishna's Ideal for the Present Age**

This is the transcript of the Talk given by Swami Prabhananda, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, 27 Arawa Street, New Lynn, **Auckland, New Zealand** on the 26th of July 2011.

*Sthapakaya ca dharmasya  
sarva Dharma-svarupine;  
Avatara-varisthaya  
Ramakrshnaya te namah.*

### **Introduction**

Dear brother monks, members of the newly formed Vedanta society here, and dear devotees. This is my first visit and as you have heard I am here for two days. It is nice to see people interested in Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and much more, I say, Sri Sarada Devi. Wherever such a group functions, I believe it to be a Holy place. I am happy to visit this centre. I have been requested just now to tell my experiences. But it is already late. I was told that last night was the coldest night here. I should not make the mistake of delivering any long speech or narrating my experiences. I will say a few words on the subject that has already been announced.

### **Sri Ramakrishna**

First of all, Sri Ramakrishna, as you all know is no doubt one of the greatest men the world has produced. He was so great that even his own disciples hesitated to claim that they understood him. Sri Ramakrishna attracted the attention of many people during his life time. The great **Brahma leader** Keshab Chandra Sen, in 1875, first wrote about Sri Ramakrishna in news papers and drew the attention of educated young people. Thereafter Swami Vivekananda's great achievement at the Chicago parliament of religions made him known much more among greater circles in Europe and America.

### **Tributes**

A simple statement made by Swami Vivekananda himself is to be remembered before I take up the subject that has been chosen. He said that Sri Ramakrishna was a wonderful person. He lived a life the significance of which people did not know. I have tried to read the meaning of his life. So many books and so many articles in different languages have come out in appreciation, so much so that one writer has described



**Swami Prabhananda speaking at the Vedanta Centre, Auckland**

him as phenomenon. Phenomenon is something which cannot be explained to the satisfaction of all but at the same time its reality cannot be denied. Another great European scholar described him as *pleroma*, which is almost equivalent of Sanskrit word *Purna*. He is a fully developed soul. In this way many persons have paid their tribute to him. An Indian Christian author described Sri Ramakrishna thus, let me quote, "the character of Sri Ramakrishna was singularly simple. He seems to be aware of only of a single motive namely a passion for God that ruled him and filled him." When we follow this clue, every detail of his character and life falls into place.

### **According to ones own light**

No doubt, Sri Ramakrishna created a new wave in the religious world. Thereafter we find that a large number of people, as I have already mentioned, wrote about him. The Ramakrishna scholarship is characterized by certain features. Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Ramchandra Datta, another direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and other scholars like Romain Rolland and Christopher Isherwood presented the biography of Sri Ramakrishna based on their own understanding. Some have admitted that they have tried to write the biography

satisfactorily but have failed. Others didn't admit this. But if we analyze their writings, we find that they in fact placed before us their understanding about Sri Ramakrishna and nothing more. None should claim that he or she has painted Sri Ramakrishna as he was. Another very important thing to note is that many foreign writers authored books, articles and papers on Sri Ramakrishna. Here, the problem of cross cultural dealing becomes a very important issue. A number of scholars, who have studied all these books and papers, came to the conclusion that most of them could not understand because of this cross cultural dealing. I was born and brought up in Bengal. In that famous book, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, authored by M, there are still one or two words that I have not understood. Not understood in the sense that in the meaning that the author wanted to convey remains elusive.

### **His originality**

Now, when we discuss this particular subject of Sri Ramakrishna's contribution to the times, let us remember one important comment made by Swami Vivekananda. He said that 'the man at whose feet I sat all my life -- and it is only a few ideas of his that I try to teach -- could [hardly] write his name at all. All my life I have not seen another

man like that, though I have travelled all over the world. When I think of that man, I feel myself as a fool, because I want to read books and he never did. He never wanted to lick the plates after other people had eaten. That is why he was his own book. All my life I am repeating what Jack said and John said, and never would say anything myself.” Please try to understand this then you will be able to appreciate this particular aspect. Whatever Sri Ramakrishna has done was based on his own ideas. In his own words, he was guided by the Divine Mother. It has been observed that many of these, which he exemplified in his own life, were new and unique. We find that these ideas can be classified under two categories.

1.) Certain things which were universal and of enduring value. 2.) Another aspect of his teachings was related to local situations.

For example, a very well known figure Professor Quay who wrote Indian monasticism says that Sri Ramakrishna revolutionized monasticism. In this topic, Professor Quay had mentioned about Hindu monasticism in particular and monasticism in general. His writing on monasticism is not universally applicable. On the other hand, there are several very important teachings of Sri Ramakrishna which are universal in nature and I will mention a few of them.

### Realise the Divinity of the soul

First of all, Sri Ramakrishna confirmed from his own experience the idea of divinity of the soul. Some religions claim that the man is a born sinner. He never admitted that and neither does the Indian religious tradition. The rishis of the olden days declared that every human being is “*Amritasya Putrāḥ*—the children of Immortal Bliss.” There is divinity in each human being. According to the modern scientists, like Julian Huxley, every man has immense possibilities. He suggested that the science of human possibilities should be considered. This is a unique idea that we have practically forgotten. We have to remember that the goal of human life is to realize this potential divinity and nothing short of it.

### Importance of Prayer

According to our *Rig Vedic* culture,

the emphasis of primary form of spiritual practice is prayer and worship. We chant lot of *stotras* etc. but we have forgotten the importance of prayer which we found in the *Rig Vedā*. Sri Ramakrishna has brought back this fire of aspiration which is called *vyākulātā* (deep longing to realize God) in Bengali. This is an important contribution. If you read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* carefully, you will find—he has repeatedly mentioned the importance of prayer. Sometimes he demonstrated it before the devotees. This revival of the spirit of *Rig Vedā* is applicable to the whole world.

### Religious Harmony

Religious harmony has been claimed by many religious leaders all over the world. But for all practical purposes the essential contribution was made in the *Rig Vedā* – **Truth is One; Sages call it by different names** and was applied by Sri Ramakrishna in different ways. We find that therein are some fundamental questions which were answered. For example, he harmonized the concept of God as a person and God as an impersonal entity. If you read carefully, when he met M, the author of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, on the first day, asked M whether he believed in *Nirākār Ishwar* or *Sākār Ishwar* (God without form or God with form). Immediately M, being a brilliant scholar, questioned himself: how God can be both formless and with form at the same time? It was a riddle for him. Afterwards however he learnt from Sri Ramakrishna the answer to this question.

### God is one

We find that every religion has two parts. One is the essential part and the other is the non essential part. For example, we know that in rice the kernel is very important. But the kernel cannot survive if there is no husk. By removing the husk we take the rice. But both are important. At the same time we have to understand that that which is inside is most important. The husk, the exterior, is not as important as the kernel. Keeping in this view, at the interfaith level, Sri Ramakrishna’s message was that the God of the Hindus is not different from the God of the Christians or the Muslims. The same God appears to be different because the religious language employed in describing Him varies from religion

to religion. What is this language? It is the symbols, the myths, the images, the philosophies etc. Sri Ramakrishna, you will find in the entire *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, repeatedly gives so many illustrations to emphasize that though you may be Muslim and I may be Hindu, your God and my God are not two different entities. They are the same entity. Whether you consider Him as formless, whether you consider Him with a particular form it does not matter. The same reality, the same truth, is being sought.

### Four Distinct Paths

Sri Ramakrishna knew that man has different kinds of nature. Some are intellectual and others are argumentative rationally. There is a path called Jnana-Yoga for them to follow. There are some emotional persons. Emotion is part and parcel of a person. The importance of emotion is being recognized in education only since 1992. Emotion plays an important part in religious life. Emphasizing on emotional needs of human growth is the path called Bhakti-Yoga. Every one of us knows that we have the vital breath called *Prāna*. Making use of *prāna* there is also a path known as Raja-Yoga. We also have the capacity to do work by hand, by our mental strength, by different organs also. So that also can be exploited for realizing truth. This is called Karma Yoga. In fact, briefly speaking there are four distinct paths. Different great saints have emphasized one or the other particular path. For example, the great Sankaracharya is said to have placed emphasis on the growth of intelligence. But others do not agree. Likewise, Ramanuja emphasized on Bhakti. Similarly we find that different saints and different spiritual practitioners have emphasized this or that. But Sri Ramakrishna has shown that these are the different faculties of the human being. If we combine them, we can put them together and if we could make use of each faculty it becomes easier for the human being or the spiritual aspirant to achieve the goal.

### Motherhood of God

As you know, in Hindu religion, there is worship of God who is a masculine figure and worship of God who is a feminine figure. It is very interesting that Sri Ramakrishna emphasized the worship of Divine Mother. He himself practiced the religion suggested by



different sects of Hinduism and religions practiced by other communities. He always maintained the worship of the Divine Mother. Not only that, he entrusted Sri Sarada Devi, his spiritual consort, to preach, propagate and put into practice in her own life the worship of the Divine Mother or the motherhood of God. This is a big contribution. One of the interpretations that Swami Vivekananda has given for Sri Ramakrishna's emphasis on Mother worship is that it was to improve the status of women all over the world.

If you compare the status that has been given to women in the present day society, it is still lower than that of men. Unlike many other countries, India has a lady as the President. If you look at the general conditions of women all over India, the situation is entirely different. The lower status of the women is a worldwide problem. Women deserve due recognition of the divine power within every one of them. To take this issue seriously, Sri Ramakrishna himself formally worshipped his own wife Sri Sarada Devi as the Divine Mother. From that moment onwards she was entrusted with the responsibility of spreading the message.

### **Vedanta in practice**

In the Ramakrishna movement, in the case of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda and house holder disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and also monastic disciples, **there is one special feature. It is to put Vedanta into practice.** Unless you put religion into practice it is no religion at all. Many of you have met Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, a great orator. He used to say that after independence India has become more religious and less spiritual.

**Spirituality is the essence of religion.**

**Vedanta** was accepted as the solution for all kinds of major problems of human life because Vedanta could be put into practice. There were many scholars who have challenged Swami Vivekananda. But I request you to read carefully the four speeches that Swami Vivekananda had given on Practical Vedanta. He claimed that if Vedanta cannot be applied in life, then what is the use of Vedanta? According to Prof. Max Muller, religion and philosophy have come to the same standing.

Religion is something to be put into practice. It must not remain confined to certain rituals, practices or reading

and understanding some books and giving talks etc. They are of no value. So Sri Ramakrishna's message in brief was: **be spiritual and realize that truth for yourself first.** This is the ultimate goal. The immediate goal is to try to deepen your spiritual life. Everyone has a spiritual life. Every one of you is not only a body-mind complex; behind it there is a spirit. Try to realize it. When you realize it fully, you have achieved the highest goal. Swami Vivekananda repeatedly emphasized the need for man-making, character-building education. By that only you will be able to make better and greater use of spirituality for developing yourselves. The possibility is in every one of us. It can be manifested better when you make use of Vedanta and make use of the principles that were followed by Sri Ramakrishna himself in his own life and by Sri Sarada Devi in hers.

### **Human Value and Practicing Vedanta**

Another important point, I should tell you about is the human value. UNESCO has prepared a report for the education for the children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A commission was set up. It was published in 1996. There it was mentioned clearly that there are four aspects. The education system should be such that

**1)** the child must learn different kinds of information which gradually transforms to knowledge. **2)** They must be taught to make use of hands, feet, mind etc. to do things. **3)** They must develop healthy and good relationship with neighbours. It was never before in the list of objectives of education. But this time it was made clear. **4)** They must learn to be themselves. First of all try to be their own. They must try to stand on their own feet.

All these four points you can find in the Gospel. You can find them in the life and teachings of the Holy Mother. If you want to put Vedanta into practice, please follow these four points. By that not only you will develop but you will also help others. Today man has made much progress in science and technology. But he has failed to understand oneself and to understand his neighbor. By understanding this, they will have a better relationship. This is true at the community level; it is true at the national and international level. We are failing in this respect. A

number of scholars have pointed out that our advancement in science and technology has made us more selfish and more self centered than we were before. So if you have to take care of this particular aspect of the human being then Vedanta as practiced by Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda is the solution.

Here you have come together with a particular purpose, I believe, to practice Vedanta in life; to put the noble ideas that have been given by Vedanta into your daily life. In this way, try to help yourselves and at the same time help your neighbours to come together, to live together happily. We must come forward and try to contribute as much as possible to the growth and development of this Vedantic concept. A number of you have come forward to form this society and I hope it will prosper. I hope and pray to the Holy Trio that they will be with us (though they have left their mortal bodies). Have faith in that. To have faith in that, you should have faith in yourself. That is the first lesson of life. To have faith in yourself is to have faith in the divinity within you.

With these few words I will stop here and thank you all for your patient hearing.

### **On Sri Ramakrishna**

Brothers, you have touched another chord in my heart, the deepest of all, and that is the mention of my teacher, my master, my hero, my ideal, my God in life - Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. If there has been anything achieved by me, by thoughts, or words, or deeds, if from my lips has ever fallen one word that has helped any one in the world, I lay no claim to it, it was his. .... and all that has been life-giving, strengthening, pure, and holy, has been his inspiration, his words, and he himself. Yes, my friends, the world has yet to know that man. We read in the history of the world about prophets and their lives, and these come down to us through centuries of writings and workings by their disciples. Through thousands of years of chiselling and modelling, the lives of the great prophets of yore come down to us; and yet, in my opinion, not one stands so high in brilliance as that life which I saw with my own eyes, under whose shadow I have lived, at whose feet I have learnt everything — the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

--- Swami Vivekananda

*According to the Vishuddha Siddhanta Almanac Swami Akhandananda's birthday celebration was observed on Tuesday, the 27th of September, 2011.*

### The Young Monks

It was Hari (Turiyananda) who brought his friend Gangadhar Ghatak (Akhandananda) to Dakshineswar in 1884. Ramakrishna told Gangadhar that he ought to associate with Naren and learn from his example. Gangadhar followed this advice and, as a result, became devoted to Naren. In later life, as Swami Akhandananda, he was one of the most ardent exponents of Vivekananda's philosophy of social service: "The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted – let these be your God." He led the first famine relief project of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897; then, collecting the children of those who had died in the famine, he started an orphanage and industrial school. The rest of his life was devoted to such work: collecting money and food for famine relief, agitating for the improvement of the educational system, teaching his orphans, nursing patients during a cholera epidemic. The sight of hunger moved him so painfully that he himself would refuse to eat, until doctors warned him that he would collapse and have to be waited on. This was the only argument which could make any impression on him, for he dreaded the thought of ceasing to be useful to others.

After taking the monastic vows, in 1886, Akhandananda had wandered all over the Himalayas and had spent three years in Tibet. He wrote articles about this period in his life for the *Udbodhan*.

In 1934, after the death of Swami Shivananda, he became the third President of the Order. He died in 1937.

### Childhood

Swami Akhandananda was born as Gangadhar Gangopadhyaya on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1864, in the Ahiritola area of western Calcutta. His father, Srimanta Gangopadhyaya, was a priest and Sanskrit teacher who also practised yoga and Tantra. His mother, Vamasundari was a devout woman.

Gangadhar was a vivacious, handsome boy. He was admitted to the Oriental Seminary, but he was not particularly interested in formal education. From



**Swami Akhandananda**  
(One who enjoys the bliss of the  
Undivided Existence)  
(1864 -1937)

his very childhood, Gangadhar was so compassionate that he once gave his own shirt to a poor classmate whose shirt was torn. Without telling his parents, he would secretly give food to beggars. He was a strong moralist and always helped his wayward friends.

Gangadhar was a close friend of Surendra Ghosh, a son of the famous dramatist and actor Girish Chandra Ghosh; together they formed an amateur theatrical party in North Calcutta. Gangadhar took roles in several dramas and earned some reputation as an actor. But his theatrical ability could not hold in check his deep spiritual inclination.

Gangadhar was fascinated by the mendicants and by their stories about the holy places of India. He cherished a desire to see the Himalayas and the ashramas of the great sages.

### Initial meeting with Sri Ramakrishna

In 1877 Gangadhar and his friend Harinath met Sri Ramakrishna at Dinanath Basu's house in Baghbazar. Seeing the Master in samadhi, Gangadhar's spiritual longing increased. At twelve, Gangadhar met a monk at the Sarvamangala Temple in Cossipore, and left home with the monk without informing his parents.

Gangadhar's parents wept for their only son and searched for him in Varanasi, Vrindaban and other holy places. As it turned out, however, Gangadhar had gone to Burdwan, sixty miles from Calcutta. The monk suggested that he return home, as he was too young for monastic life. When he did, his parents were overjoyed to have him home again.

### In the company of Sri Ramakrishna

In May 1883, when he was nineteen, Gangadhar visited Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. The Master received Gangadhar cordially, and made him sit on his small cot. He then asked, "Have you ever seen me before?" "Yes," Gangadhar replied, I saw you once when I was very young at the house of Dinanath Basu in Calcutta." Hearing this Sri Ramakrishna commented "Listen to this! The boy says that he met me when he was very young. This little one had an early boyhood." Gangadhar looked exceptionally young for his age and moreover, he had a childlike demeanour.

Gangadhar later recalled his first meetings with the Master:

"In the afternoon the Master asked me to go to the *Panchavati* after saluting the deities at the Kali and Vishnu temples. Later in the evening, as I returned to the Master's room, I heard music being played from the two *nahabats* [concert towers], and the temple garden was filled with the melodious sound of the vesper bells. The Master was seated on his cot, barely visible. He did not have any outer consciousness. As he had asked me to stay overnight at the temple garden, I did so. The next morning, when I was about to leave for Calcutta, he said to me with a smile, 'Come again on Saturday'.

After a few days I went to Sri Ramakrishna for the second time on a Saturday, and I was again made to stay overnight. In the evening, after the Vesper was over, the Master handed me a mat and asked me to spread it on the western veranda. He took his pillow and sat down on the mat. He then asked me to sit in a comfortable posture and to



meditate. "It is not good to sit leaning forward or to hold the body too straight," he said. That evening the Master initiated me by writing a mantram on my tongue."

On weekends many devotees would come to visit the Master. In order to avoid the crowd, Gangadhar would go on weekdays, sometimes he would stay overnight. This enabled Sri Ramakrishna to imprint his way of life and teachings on the mind of his young disciple.

Sri Ramakrishna did not want his young disciples to be stuck in the obsolete customs of an older generation, yet at the same time he did not want to disturb their faith. He did not care for any kind of excessive behaviour in practising religion; he freed them from spiritual vanity. His way of teaching was simple and natural, and he knew how to make religion interesting. He taught each of them individually, according to the temperament of each disciple. The Master was never dry or boring; he would make jokes even while speaking on the most exalted topics. He was a loving father to his disciples as well as their friend.

Sri Ramakrishna taught from his own experience, not through knowledge acquired from books. Gangadhar later recalled:

"Once I spent a night at Dakshineswar with several other disciples, and the Master had us all sit for meditation. ...The pure joy we experienced in those boyhood days cannot be expressed in words. Suddenly the Master asked me, "Do you know how to pray?" Saying this he flung his hands and feet about restlessly – like a child impatient for its mother. Then he cried out, "Mother dear, grant me knowledge and devotion. I don't want anything else. I can't live without you." While thus teaching us how to pray, he looked just like a small boy. Profuse tears rolled down his chest, and he passed into deep Samadhi. I was convinced that the Master did that for my sake.

One morning Sri Ramakrishna took me to the Kali temple. Whenever I went there alone I stood outside the threshold, but on this occasion the Master took me into the sanctum sanctorum and showed me the face of Lord Shiva. His face was not visible from outside the shrine. The Master said, "Look, here is the living Shiva."

I felt that Lord Shiva was conscious and breathing. I was astonished. How potent were the Master's words! Up to that time I had thought that this image was just like all the other Shiva images I had seen."

In the middle of 1885 Sri Ramakrishna developed throat cancer. He moved to Shyampukur in Calcutta for treatment, and then to Cossipore. Gangadhar began to serve the Master wherever he could, continuing all the while his spiritual disciplines and study. At night he used to meditate with Harinath on the bank of the Ganges. Gangadhar's father observed that his son was not interested in completing his education, so he found a job for Gangadhar in a merchant's office. Gangadhar worked there a few days and then gave it up. He then fully engaged himself in spiritual disciplines and service to the Master. He washed the dishes at Cossipore garden house and did all sorts of errands.

Even on his deathbed, Sri Ramakrishna took care of his disciple's needs like a loving mother, and chastised them for any mistakes. Sri Ramakrishna formed his monastic order at Cossipore and distributed ochre clothes to eleven of his would-be monastic disciples, saving one for Girish Chandra Ghosh. He gave ochre cloths to Gangadhar and Harinath on another day.

Sri Ramakrishna passed away at 1.02 a.m. on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1886. The Master's body was later cremated at the Cossipore cremation ground, and half of his relics were installed at Kankurgachi Yogodyana. Gangadhar was present on that occasion

#### **Wanderings in the Himalayas and Tibet**

Some of the young disciples of Sri Ramakrishna resided at the Cossipore Garden House for a couple of weeks and then moved to a dilapidated house at Baranagore, where they established the first Ramakrishna Monastery. Shashi, another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, began the worship service of the Master, while the others remained absorbed in meditation and study. On the Christmas Eve of 1886, Gangadhar went with the other disciples to Antpur and took vows of renunciation. He returned home and told his father secretly that he would leave for the Himalayas very soon. His father gave his consent. In February 1887 Gangadhar took the ochre cloth that the Master

had given to him and left the monastery without telling anyone. Only his noble father went to Howrah station to see him off. He blessed his son, "Go, my son. Fulfil your mission in life. This world is unreal. I bless you: May you attain unflinching devotion to God."

Gangadhar first visited Bodh Gaya, where Buddha attained nirvana. While in Varanasi, Gangadhar met the great saint Trailanga Swami, and received his blessing. One can learn more from a saint than from a library of a million books. Gangadhar absorbed the spiritual heritage of India from her holy places and saints. After staying for a month in Varanasi, Gangadhar left for Ayodhya, the birthplace of Ramachandra. He then went to Haridwar, in the foothills of the Himalayas, via Lucknow and Naimisharanya, an ancient Hindu cultural centre.

In March 1887 Gangadhar wrote to Pramadas asking him to send a drum to Baranagore Monastery for the monks' vesper services. Thus he first introduced this great person to Swami Vivekananda and other disciples of the Master.

Gangadhar then went to Rishikesh, a place for the hermits. There he saw mendicants practising their austerities, meditating and discussing the Upanishads and the Gita. He found a thatched hut on the bank of the Ganges, where he practised meditation.

Gangadhar's entire travel account was recorded in his book *Smriti-Katha* (From Holy Wanderings to The Service of God in Man). He travelled hundreds of miles in the dangerous mountains of the Himalayas without carrying any money or any extra clothing, depending only on God. When a monk of the Mussoorie Hills heard that Gangadhar was going to Gangotri and Jamunotri (the sources of the Ganga and Yamuna respectively) he offered some money and blankets to Gangadhar, but he refused. Gangadhar accepted only a staff and proceeded on his journey.

Gangadhar walked sixty miles barefoot to reach Tihri, where he rested awhile. He then continued his long walk over the high Himalayan range and visited Yamunotri and Gangotri, two very important holy places, and the most difficult to reach. Gangadhar stayed at Gangotri for a week, then

decided to visit Kedarnath and Badrinath. Gangadhar wholeheartedly depended on Ramakrishna, and sometimes he would follow a dangerous route in the Himalayas in order to test whether the Master was with him or not. Today it is relatively easy to travel to Kedarnath and Badrinath by car from Haridwar, but when Gangadhar was a young man it was extremely difficult and indeed dangerous to visit those inaccessible places. To the Hindus, the Himalayas are the abode of Gods and Vedantic mystics. The vast mountain range of the Himalayas reminded Gangadhar of the Cosmic God Shiva and his consort Parvati, the daughter of the Himalayas.

Gangadhar later recalled, “When I first saw the entirely snow-clad, huge, and bright peak on which the temple of Kedarnath is situated, I was stupefied ... The temple of Kedarnath was on the lap of a huge peak and the entire peak was now revealing itself before me. It was as bright as the glowing morning sun. Thousands of soft rays were emerging from the peak and they were all enveloping and overwhelming me. I thought to myself that I had come to this place of eternal light leaving the eternal darkness permanently behind. My eyes became indrawn and the huge peak of the mountain appeared before me as an eternal, uncreated symbol of Shiva. This was not imagination. It was a divine experience. Nowhere else in the entire Himalayas can you see such a resplendent form of Shiva.”

From Kedarnath, Gangadhar went to Badrinath, a place sacred to Lord Vishnu, where Sage Vyasa compiled the Vedas and wrote the Puranas, and Shankara wrote his commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and the Gita. It is a wonderful place to practise austerities. Gangadhar stayed in that spiritual place for some days and then decided to venture to Tibet via the Mana Pass.

Gangadhar started for Tibet with a trader, but partway into the journey, the trader pointed in the direction of the Thuling Monastery and went his own way. It was an arduous journey, and before he could reach the Monastery Gangadhar fell unconscious on the ice. The next morning a monk happened to find him and carried him to the Monastery. The lamas warmed him, thus saving his life. Gangadhar learnt the Tibetan

language in fifteen days, and stayed there for three months. Observing the lamas' luxury, their love of money, food, and dress, he spoke to them on behalf of the poor. Because of this, the lamas kept him captive in the monastery and tortured him.

The next year Gangadhar again went to Tibet, this time to Daba. Gangadhar then visited Mount Kailas and Manas Sarovar. The snow-clad Kailas is like a natural image of the Lord Shiva, and Manas Sarovar is a large lake with a fifty-mile circumference. There are eight Buddhist monasteries around the lake.

In July 1889 Gangadhar went to Tibet a third time. He planned to go to Lhasa but many of the Tibetans objected to his going, suspecting him of being a British spy. He made three determined efforts to reach Lhasa but failed. Gangadhar returned to Kashmir via Ladakh, where he was arrested by the British government. He was released when it was revealed that he was a monk and had no political motives. As he was quite familiar with the Tibetan people, language, customs, and religious culture, the British government offered him a consul's post in Tibet, but he refused to accept this.

#### With Swami Vivekananda

In June of 1890, after being away for three and a half years, Gangadhar returned to the Baranagore Monastery. Vivekananda and the other brother disciples were extremely happy to have him back and to hear of his adventurous travel. Swamiji affectionately called him ‘Ganges’, as his name was Ganga-dhar, and sometimes ‘Ice-Father’, as his skin had been burned with cold. In the first week of July, Swamiji advised Gangadhar to take his final monastic vows before Sri Ramakrishna's picture, in accordance with the Vedantic tradition. Gangadhar then became Swami Akhandananda (which means Undivided Bliss).

Swami Vivekananda now wanted to practise austerities in the Himalayas, so in mid-July he left the monastery, taking Akhandananda as his companion. Before their departure, they went to Holy Mother for her blessing. She blessed them and told Akhandananda, “My son, you know the way of life in the mountains. Please take care of Naren, so that he may not suffer from lack of food.”

They first travelled to Bhagalpur, then to Baidyanath, Gazipur, and Varanasi, where they became the guests of Pramadas Mittra. Afterwards they visited Ayodhya and then proceeded to Nainital, in the Himalayas. One day Akhandananda bathed in the ice-cold water of a lake, and as a result caught a severe cold accompanied by chest pain. From Nainital they went to Almora, where they joined Swami Saradananda and Vaikuntha Nath Sanyal. They planned to settle on the bank of the Ganges with the intention of practising sadhana. Unfortunately, however, Akhandananda was attacked by fever at Karnaprayag, and Swamiji became sick as well. The party moved to Dehra Dun, and were joined there by Swami Turiyananda. After arranging for Akhandananda's medical treatment, Swamiji and the others left for Rishikesh to practise spiritual disciplines.

In late 1890, when Akhandananda had slightly improved, it was suggested that he go to Meerut for further treatment. Swamiji had also become very sick in Rishikesh; he and the others joined Akhandananda in Meerut, where they became the guests of Dr. Trailokya Nath Ghosh. Swamis Brahmananda and Advaitananda also joined them, and Meerut thus became a second Baranagore Monastery. They lived there for nearly six weeks. While there, Akhandananda would bring books from the Meerut library for Swamiji, and he himself would also study. In the early part of 1891, Swamiji departed alone as an itinerant monk, and the other brothers went off in different directions. ***(To be continued in the next edition of Reach)***

#### Source:

*God Lived With Them: Life Stories of sixteen monastic disciples* by Swami Chetanananda; Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta; pages 557-570.

*Ramakrishna and his Disciples* by Christopher Isherwood; Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta; pages 235-6.



Learning and wisdom are superfluities, the surface glitter merely, but it is the heart that is the seat of all power. It is not in the brain but in the heart that the Atman, possessed of knowledge, power, and activity, has its seat.

Purity, patience, and perseverance are the three essentials to success and, above all, love.

--- Swami Vivekananda