

CHICAGO CALLING

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Na Hanyate

The Arjuna of Mahabharata fame was confused. He had prepared himself for more than a decade for the war, but when the moment came to plunge into action, to destroy the enemies, Arjuna fell on his knees and took refuge with his friend and philosopher Sri Krishna.

Bhagavan Sri Krishna, God in human form, in order to save Arjuna from his despondency, taught him the truth by saying, "...Na Hanyate" (Gita 2.19). "It does not die."

Arjuna was dejected, thinking that he was going to kill his own kith and kin, his teachers, his friends, even his highly respected grandfather, Bhishma. Sri Krishna in very clear words told Arjuna that "It is not killed when the body is killed" (Gita 2.20). "Na Hanyate Hanyamane Sharire." Sri Krishna indicated to Arjuna that "that Brahman which is without prior or posterior, without interior or exterior, It (the Self) is the perceiver of everything" (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.5.19).

If we read carefully we shall find that Sri Krishna mentioned two different entities—'It' and 'Body'. Body can be killed but not It—Brahman or the Atman (Self). Like our body, this whole world with its millions of varieties is subject to change. This we all know from our daily experience.

I was a little baby and could be comfortably laid on the lap of my mother. Now I'm a grown up person. I'll grow old and some day die. These experiences of change are very common. Not only my body, but also everything, which has a name and a form, is changeable. This knowledge of change also proves that there is something, there must be a thing, which is observing the changes. A changeable object cannot notice another changeable object—there must be something which is static, changeless and without name and form.

What is it? In ancient India some thoughtful people, known as Rishis, started research. In the beginning itself, they fixed the goal of that great research. It should be One without a Second, all pervading, and the source of everything, both Jada and Chetan (non-sentient and sentient). They called it Brahman and also Atman. Sometimes It has been called the Sakshi or Witness.

Along with the material world, the Rishis also focused their attention on the nature of man. What is this human? They discovered that the human is not only a combination of Body (gross) and Mind (subtle). It is also Divine and that Divine element is covered by five sheaths.

1. Material Sheath (Annamaya Kosha)

The body is the product of food. It lives on food and dies without it. It is a mass of skin, flesh, blood, bones and filth (Vivekachudamani, Sloka 154).

2. Vital Sheath (Pranamaya Kosha)

It is the product of five vital airs and five organs of action (Viv., Sloka 165). Permeated by this Vital Sheath, the Material Sheath engages itself in all activities.

3. Mental Sheath (Manomaya Kosha)

It is the product of mind together with the organs of knowledge. It is powerful. From it arises the notion of 'I' and 'Mine'. It manifests itself as permeating the Vital Sheath.

4. Knowledge Sheath (Vijnanamaya Kosha)

It is a combination of Buddhi, the mind's determinative faculty, and the organs of knowledge. It feels like the master, the agent of all actions, subtle and gross. Hence, it becomes the cause of a person's transmigration (Viv., Sloka 184). The Knowledge Sheath is exceedingly effulgent owing to its close proximity to the Supreme Self. It is a superimposition on the Self.

Then comes the last cover of the Truth, the goal of human life, Brahman.

5. Blissful Sheath (Anandamaya Kosha)

It is the modification of wrong knowledge or nescience, which manifests itself being reflected by the Atman, which is Bliss Absolute.

In the scriptures it is said, "Pancha-kosha vilakshana Atma." "The Atman, the source of Bliss Absolute, is beyond the five covers." If the mind is attached to any of these sheaths, it will never reach the goal, Brahman, the One without a second, the source of all manifested and unmanifested beings and things. Everything in manifestation rests on Brahman and also dissolves into It.

Sri Krishna referred to this Brahman with the term 'Na hanyate'. Brahman, being beyond time, space and causation, cannot be described in words.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad we find an interesting conversation (3.4.2) where a student, Ushasta by name, asked a great rishi, Yajnavalka,

about Brahman—"O venerable sir, please tell me precisely about Brahman. Tell me directly without any ambiguity, as one says, "That is a cow or that is a horse."

In reply the rishi said, "O Ushasta, you cannot see the seer of sight, you cannot hear the hearer of hearing, you cannot think the thinker of thought, you cannot know the knower of knowledge. Everything beside this (Brahman or Atman) is perishable."

The rishi of the Shvetashvatara Upanishad tried to describe Brahman, using terms, which a human can understand. It says, "(Brahman) is partless (nishkalam), actionless (nishkriyam), tranquil (shantam), faultless (niravodyam), taintless (niranjanam), the supreme bridge to immortality."

In order to make Arjuna understand the difference between the eternally permanent truth and the temporary, Sri Krishna said, "Na-Hanyate".



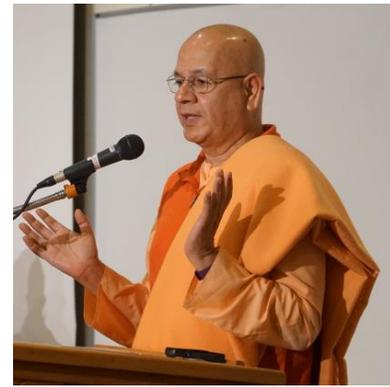
The moment I have realized God sitting in the temple of every human body, the moment I stand in reverence before every human being and see God in him - that moment I am free from bondage, everything that binds vanishes, and I am free.

Swami Vivekananda

DVAITA VEDANTA: BASICS

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This article is based on the talk delivered during
September 2018 spiritual retreat in Ganges.



Swami Ishatmananda told us about Nirvaan. When he was asked where is his mother, surprisingly, he didn't point to the mother who gave him birth, but he pointed to Holy Mother, "There is mother". We all need to be like Nirvaan, seeing our mother in God, and God is always present. Vedanta is like Sri Ramakrishna's story of sweet cake. However you eat it, from the front or the back, it is sweet; it is tasty. Vedanta is like that. You study and practice Advaita, Visishta Advaita, Dwaita; all are so beautiful in their approach to reality, in their approach to the inner depths of philosophy, in their power to show us what we cannot ordinarily see. That is the power of Vedanta. We had wonderful expositions of Advaita and Visishtha Advaita. What a wonderful way Swami Tyagananda and Swami Yogatmananda showed how we can relate to the reality. In Dwaita Reality becomes God.

In Dwaita Vedanta, God is real and also this world created by God is real. Cause is real and effect is also real. What is the relation between cause and effect? God is the efficient cause of this universe, but when He created, where did He get the material from? He is also the material cause of the universe. So what we see as this world is nothing but God, but we are not able to see God, to find God. The method to have that realization is through that third eye, the eye of Shiva, the eye of knowledge. But knowledge is so difficult. It cannot come just by reading the Upanishads and memorizing a few verses. So is there any other way? Yes, there is, in Sri Ramakrishna's words, 'An easier way'.

That easier way is the way of love. Now, it is

very easy to think of God as vast, most powerful, most virtuous. 'Ojo asi, ojo mahi dehi.' The prayer says 'grant me what you possess. I don't have that confidence, that strength. You need to be my support, my strength so that I can also stand on my own feet supported by You.' Unless God supports us, we are not able to stand. Swami Tyagananda gave the wonderful example of Hanuman and Rama. When the Rama Setu was being built, people wrote the Ram Nam on the stones and put them in water and the stones floated and the bridge was being built. Rama thought, 'Oh, Rama's name is so powerful, let me try.' So he wrote it himself and put the stone in the water but that stone sank. He heard a voice, 'Oh lord, that will happen.' He looked back and saw Hanumanji. He was a devotee of Rama and always followed him like a shadow. All others had gone to take rest, but Hanuman was with Rama. Hanuman said, "Whatever is dropped from your hand will drown. It is because of your support that we are here. When you let go, we all will drown." We are all supported by God, protected by God; That's why we live, we work.

Who really works? It's incorrect to say we work, because we don't know the power that works through us. It is Rama's power working through our eyes, ears and hands. In ignorance we say 'I am the doer.' Sri Ramakrishna once said, "Do you know the difference between ignorance and knowledge? When we say 'I have achieved this, 'I have done this, it is ignorance. When you say God has done this, or by the grace of God I have been made to do this, then that is called knowledge."

Knowledge is the truth. Where is that God who is so kind to us, who is always with us, without whom we cannot breathe—That Ananda Rupi God, that blissful being, where is that God? If God is not there, who will breathe, who will see? Without God life is not possible. Forgetting God, life is not worth living, life is miserable. Remembering God, life is full of bliss. Someone said, "This world is all an illusion, a confusion", but a devotee said, "What? This is a mart of joy." When God is with us, then it is always blissful. You never get old; you are always young. If we forget God, then all the problems of old age, death, relationships come. Let us surrender to God. Let us eat mangoes, not count the branches and leaves. You become so blissful that you find God is every movement of life. Where does God reside? In heaven? Once in a primary class, the teacher asked, "Where does God live?" Many students said he lives above the clouds, in heaven. Others said that God lives in the hearts of human beings. A small boy said, 'God lives in our bathroom'. 'What do you mean?', asked the teacher. 'Yes, because sometimes in the morning the bathroom door is locked from the inside, and my father walks around in front of it and says, 'Oh God, you are still in there!'

For us followers of Vedanta, God is not in heaven. He might be, but we don't want him so far. We want to make him a member of our family, to be very close to us. In Islam it is said that God is as close to you as the jugular vein in your neck. Vedanta says God lives in your heart. Sri Krishna said, "Oh Arjuna, God lives in the heart of every living being." That is the Vedanta philosophy. How does he reside? He is the antaryami, the inner controller. It is God who says, 'don't do that, do this'. But we have to have the right ear to hear Him. Sometimes the voice is feeble. You see ice cream and a voice comes, 'Don't eat it, it is not good for you.' But we think 'This is a special ice cream, let me have it.' The antaryami always guides us in the right path. If we fall sick it is not

the fault of God. God is our guardian angel. A person was walking on the road and suddenly he heard 'Stop' and the wall just in front of him fell down. Then he was crossing the road, but there was a green light and he again heard 'Stop'. A truck passed right in front of him. He looked and asked 'Who is there?' The reply came 'I'm your guardian angel, I take care of you at every step'. The man said 'Oh, then where were you when I got married?'

Where does God reside? He resides as our Atman, as our self. 'Aham atma gudakesha, sarvabhuteshu sthitaha'. "I reside in every being as the atman." What is the atman? Our very essence, the real 'I', which is God. When we say 'I', it is God. To understand this and find that God, which is within us, is Vedanta. We can start from duality. How do we find the God that is hidden inside the heart? They say that God created this world and then He thought, 'I must hide, because if they find me, they will always be blissful and do no work. The purpose of creation will be lost.' So where to hide? An Angel said 'You have created this beautiful world, hide on the top of the mountains.' God said, 'I have created men to be very intelligent; they will find their way to the top of the mountain and find me'. The angel said, 'Then hide at the bottom of the deep ocean.' God said 'Man will become so wise, so technologically advanced that they will go deep down, so how will the Lila go on?' So God decided to reside in that place where no one will search. If they search, they will find, but no one will search there. Deep within our heart is that place. 'Paranjihani vyatrinat svyambhu'. All the senses say 'look there, hear this, etc.' But what is inside? We don't look, we ignore it, and so we don't find God residing in our heart as our own self. That is what is called God's play going on. Vedanta says this world is the play of God, his Lila. There is Nitya, the eternal unchanging reality, and Lila 'eko aham bahusyamaha', 'being one is not fun'. I want to be many.'

And God became many. He became the planets and stars and everything else. What is the purpose? It is just for fun. God wants to have fun. If you are alone there is no fun; there might be peace, there might be bliss, but God also wants to enjoy, we also want to enjoy. It is happiness, bliss, and what is the most condensed happiness? That is called God. We want to enjoy the bliss of God. That is the Vedanta sadhana.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa was an advanced soul. He had attained nirvikalpa samadhi, the culmination of Advaita Vedanta. He saw a sadhu, like a mad man, eating anything he found. He realized by seeing him that the sadhu was established in Advaita Vedanta, seeing Brahman everywhere. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Mother, don't make me like that. I want to live and enjoy talking about you, remembering you and worshipping you, singing your name and talking about you.' He said that all those jnanis have a monotone: 'The world is unreal, like a dream, and God is real. Nothing more to say!' Sri Ramakrishna said, "It's like the monotone of a shehnai. But, I want to play the flute with all seven notes and enjoy the music coming out of it."

In Advaita you become that Brahman, that blissful state. But we like to enjoy blissful things. So a Dvaitist says, 'I don't want to become sugar, I want to eat and enjoy sugar, I want to enjoy love of God'. It is said that Sri Krishna saw the love of Radha. Her love was exorbitant, ecstatic love and he was deprived of that. He said, "I want to enjoy the love of Radha, the love of a bhakta", and so with this wish he was born as Gauranga, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. God being born to enjoy the love of God! He was God incarnate, and yet the greatest devotee of Sri Krishna. What is the way to have God in our being—To live with him? The way is love, says Sri Ramakrishna. What type of love? Pure love. 'Avyavacharini bhakti'—Unadulterated love. With the whole mind, soul and heart! Jesus said to love God with all your mind and heart and soul. Many love God and pray to God, but what do they pray for? They pray for good health, their

son's good education, their daughter having a nice job, etc. They make God as the means but not as the object of prayer. That is vyavicharini bhakti. You have love for God, faith in God, but you don't want God. You want material things from God. Then you will not get God but whatever you have prayed for. Sri Ramakrishna told Swami Vivekananda, "Go to the Divine Mother and pray to her. Whatever you ask will be granted." How could he promise what the Mother would give? He was one with the Mother. The Mother resided in his heart; the Mother was speaking through him. Swami Vivekananda went to pray for some food, some clothing, some money, and a means of livelihood for his impoverished family. He came back to Sri Ramakrishna who asked, "Could you ask for what you needed?" Swamiji said "No, I could not ask." "Why?" asked Sri Ramakrishna. "Because it would be like going to a king and asking for pumpkins and potatoes." When you go to the king you ask for the right things. When you go to God, ask for devotion, for peace and purity, why ask for smaller things, which are insignificant? Tuchatva! Ask for the right things from God. "I asked from God jnana, bhakti, viveka, vairagya", said Swami Vivekananda. Give me right knowledge, devotion to you. Let me have faith in you, full surrender to you and discrimination, with the help of which we can discern what is right and what is wrong.

There are different relationships that can be maintained with God. God has to be made a member of our family. How do we develop this presence of God in our house? One way is prayer. When you go out, pray to God, 'God, I'm going, please take care of me.' When you come back, again pray to God saying, 'God, I have come, everything was good'. You start talking whenever you feel the presence of God. That will slowly develop the presence of God in that room, in that corner, and the presence of God from that corner will come into your heart and then you will feel that God is always present with you.

You will not need to go to the prayer room. You can pray anytime. I don't have to go anywhere to see my beloved. I just have to lower my neck and I see my beloved sitting in my heart. That is the real presence of God one can feel. As Swami Ishatmananda said, Sri Ramakrishna called on God as mother, as father.

That is not in the traditional Bhakti Shastras. The Bhakti Shastras state that there are five types relationships with God. First is shanta, where you are in the presence of God and you are peaceful, you don't seek anything. A Peaceful relationship, not emotional! Then there is dasya. You are the servant of God, always ready to serve God. God is my master and I want to feed him, make him sleep, that feeling comes. God is offered flowers, offered fruits, asked to take rest at a particular time. The door of the shrine should not be opened at that time. God is a living presence there. Then comes Sakhya. God becomes your friend. "Come, let us go to office, let us go to the friend we have to visit. You have to speak through me." The relationship changes, the attitude changes and God comes closer. Then there is the relationship of Vatsalya. Suddenly you become the parent and God becomes the child, a baby. Now, we don't ask anything from God. All the glory and greatness, 'ojo asi, ojo mahi dehi'... all that is gone. We don't ask anything. Now, God is someone you have to take care. At first, we asked God to give us bhakti and powers. Now, the power of Bhakti has grown so much that we start looking after God. These are not just theories; people have experienced these things. Sudama, through his mental eye saw Sri Krishna coming and listening to his songs. Gopaler Ma, who was doing japa to the small idol of baby gopal, saw the baby come and sit on her lap and snatch the mala away from her. Why was he snatching the mala away? She was taking the name of God, he should rather help and not disturb. When God is seen, then what is the need for japa? The purpose of japa is to have that realization. Gopaler Ma came to Sri Ramakrishna with Krishna

on her bosom, running and shedding tears. Wonderful experience! She feels that God's feet are touching her chest. Crying she comes to Dakshineswar to Sri Ramakrishna, and she asks Narendranath, who was a skeptic. Narendra used to say all these were the figments of the mind. When the mind is weak it starts seeing different visions. This old lady asked, 'What I see, was it true?' He said, 'Yes mother, what you saw was true, was right. It was real'. That happens when real experience comes. God becomes real.

Latu Maharaj was meditating in the evening. Sri Ramakrishna came and said, "You are meditating? The one on whom you are meditating is making dough." Holy Mother was preparing to make rotis. "Go and help her, that is a better sadhana than your meditating on Brahman." Service to God!

Sri Ramakrishna was trying to have the vision of God. Tired of worshipping the statue, he wanted to know if he was just worshipping the stone idol or was God really there. He went to the extreme and finally fell down. He then saw an ocean of light coming to him and he was drowned in that. He became superconscious. Wasn't that the Mother? The creator of the universe! With or without form, we don't know, but he didn't see Mother Kali coming with four arms. He saw an ocean of light, the light of knowledge. That was the first vision of the Divine Mother Kali. It started from Dvaita sadhana—worshipping, feeding. When he returned to consciousness of this world, he was saying 'Mother, Mother'.

Then he had Advaita sadhana and attained nirvikalpa samadhi. When he came down, though he should not have because he was living in reality, he was ordered by the Mother, 'Remain at the threshold.' That means sometimes he would be in the Lila and sometimes in the nitya. "Whenever you want to see me, you will be with me, forgetful of the world, forgetful of your body and you will be in eternity.

Sometimes you will come back to this world, play with the devotees, talk to them, dance with them, sing for them, and enjoy the Lila." He saw a small girl with disheveled hair walking in the courtyard and climbing the stairs of the temple, sometimes looking toward Calcutta. It was the Divine Mother. He could hear the sound of her anklets. He said, "Mother you may fall, please be careful." Mother was running in the courtyard. The Divine Mother who creates and protects this universe, to her Sri Ramakrishna says, "See that you do not slip and fall." That was the Dvaita sadhana. When the God who is beyond our senses becomes experienceable, enjoyable, that is Dvaita sadhana. Sri Ramakrishna says that the love needed for God realization has to be intense and yearning. You don't need to study any scripture, do chatushtaya sadhana, nothing like that. Just have love for God and you will realize God.

There was a person who used to say he was an Advaita follower. "I am like space, like kha. It doesn't matter what happens to me, everything is unreal and the atman is infinite space, not touched by anything." One day Sri Ramakrishna went to this Krishna Kishore. He found that he was disturbed and asked, "What happened? You seem to be disturbed and distressed." "Oh, don't ask, today the tax people came and since I could not pay, they said they would take away all my pots and pans. That's why I'm worried." Sri Ramakrishna laughed and said, "Why are you worrying, you are not that individual being, you are Kha. What happened to that kha? You were always proclaiming that." He is trying to say that whatever we say has to be felt. If we say 'Aham, Brahmasmi' and we feel that we are this body, how will that tally? Sri Ramakrishna gives an example of the parrot. If you make it say 'Ram, Ram' it will say it. But when the cat comes and catches the parrot, the Ram Nam is forgotten; then it says 'tya, tyā'. Its original voice comes out. 'Ram, Ram' was only learnt. Our knowledge has to be genuine too. When we are identified with this body, we feel we

have a soul, let's try to reach God from there itself. Let us get connected through our daily lives and works. How to worship? Some follow shodashopachara, others something else. But when love becomes intense, there is no need for any upachara. You don't have to speak any Sanskrit, you don't have to even utter any words. Just through your mind, offer the flower. Swami Vivekananda used to worship that way. Sri Ramakrishna, before offering the food would say, 'Oh, mother, you want me to eat first?' He then took and ate himself. This is called urjita bhakti.

What did Swami Ramakrishnananda see in the picture of Sri Ramakrishna? It was just a picture, but for him it was a living personality. Not the color or paper. He saw Sri Ramakrishna's presence there. Holy mother said 'Chaya kaya samaan'. Photo, shadow and real body are the same. It represents the deity and reminds us. Once it was very hot and Ramakrishnananda got up and thought 'Oh Thakur must need some air', so he took a hand fan and started fanning for the whole night. That type of living presence of God has to be felt. It comes through practice. In the photo, that is the beginning. In the heart, that is the middle. In the heart of everyone, that is the culmination—when we can find God present in all. Swami Vivekananda said, "My aim is to preach Vedanta to everyone, every moment that Vedanta is manifested, every soul is treated as God."

Once there was a crack in the roof at the old Baranagore Math and water started seeping in. Ramakrishnanandaji brought an umbrella and in the night, went to the shrine and kept the umbrella there. Why didn't he just take away the photo? He thought, "It is nighttime, and if I move Sri Ramakrishna he may wake up. His sleep will be disturbed." The whole night he was in the shrine, protecting him from the raindrops that were falling there. Holy Mother's way of worship was similar. When food was offered, she would say, "Come, it is time for food, come. Sit down and eat. "When food was offered, she would say,

"Come, it is time for food, come. Sit down and eat." She would close her eyes and see Sri Ramakrishna eating in her mind. Once she was going and the earthen cooking pot broke. She said, "Now there is no time to cook, come and eat this", and she felt that Ramakrishna was eating. We think that she is thinking that Ramakrishna is eating, but for her Ramakrishna is really present and eating. That experience has to come to us as well, and it will come when we have that intensity of love.

How will all this happen? Repeat God's name. When God's name is repeated with love, God comes. Sri Ramakrishna said this: "Repeat his name, sing His glories, have some holy association and do vichara." Vichara is the discrimination that God is the reality, the world is only for two days. Remember that, and God will slowly come to your life, and it will become blessed. Ramprasad said, "You have six days for yourself. Give one day for God." But, Vedanta says that you have to give everyday for God. Not even everyday, every moment for God. How will we work then? Whatever work you do, that is the worship of God. How to take care of my children? Who are the children? They are God in the form of the children. Your husband, your wife, your relative and your colleagues, all God in different forms! 'Eko aham, bahusyamaha.' The one has become many, treat them as God and live in the bliss of the presence of

God, in the company of God. Ramprasad says, "When you eat, think that you are offering food to the Divine Mother, seated in your heart. You are not the one eating! When you go for a bath, think that you are doing prostration to God. When you fall asleep, think that you are meditating on the divine. When you walk, think that you are circumambulating the temple of the Divine Mother." Every moment work for God! That's how God becomes real in our life, and we are always with God. When we can be in that state of association with the divine, that is the purpose of life. There has to be a transformation in our life through all the devotion and knowledge. The transformation is from a rude person, from an egoistic person, to a very kind person. Our ego ripens and becomes sweet, kind and soft. Then you can accept things and respond in a nice way. You can speak very kind language. That transformation comes when God comes into every moment of our life. Let us be aware of God and pray that God should be present in our life at least when we die. We do not want God only to be there when we die, we want to experience Him when we are alive—jivanmukta. God should be manifested in every moment. With intense and sincere prayer, God will come into our life. We will see God in our heart and in the hearts of everyone, in every being. Then we will say 'You are the reality.' Let us pray and find God present in every bit of this creation.



TRAVELOGUE, 2018: SOUTH EAST ASIA (PART 1)

SWAMI ISHATMANANDA
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I am not a tourist by nature, but I love to know about people and their culture. Whenever I get an opportunity, I like to mix with people from different places. Though the geography, language, culture and features of the people are different, they still have one thing in common, and that is love. Human beings like to know each other and live happily and peacefully—this truth I always find in every place. Now, I am going to tell you about my visit to Southeast Asian countries.

Usually, I try to visit India during Jan-Feb of the year. That's usually the coldest time in Chicago and mostly pleasant in India. It allows a nice break before the hectic activities of spring-summer in Chicago start.

In 2018, the plan was to visit India for four weeks in January. Then, while going back to America, I'd touch as many places in Southeast Asia and Japan as possible. Arup, a devotee from Chicago, agreed to accompany me for the whole tour, while two other devotees from Singapore would be escorting us through the Southeast Asia countries.

While on the voyage to attend the Parliament of Religions in 1893, Swamiji halted in many places in Asia—Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Singapore, (most probably) some parts of current day Malaysia, Canton (Guangzhou), Yokohama, Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo. Then, his next stop was Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada. From there, he moved on to Chicago by Rail.

As a young monk, Swamiji had traversed the whole of India and realized the hidden strength of India's religious and cultural traditions. He wanted to raise the downtrodden nation by reminding her of her past glory. While travelling for the first time

out of India to all these Asian countries, he saw the proof of the wonder that was ancient India. Every stop he took in his journey from Sri Lanka to Japan reminded him of the contributions India had made to its neighbors. In Sri Lanka and China, he saw the influence of Buddhism. He also appreciated the Hindu impact on the native Malay lands. While reaching the shores of Japan, he not only saw the visible influence of Indian heritage, but also found a template of how a nation can stand on it's own inner strength. We will revisit these topics later.

I had a packed schedule while in India—so many lectures to deliver, retreats to preside over, and devotees to meet. Also, Shivaratri was fast approaching, and I wanted to attend the service in Chicago. So, I had to complete my Southeast Asia tour before then. Late at night on January 28, after an eventful four weeks in India, I boarded a flight to Bangkok with Arup in tow. Thailand was my first destination, and two more devotees from Singapore would join me there.

After clearing customs, we stepped out of the Suvarnabhumi Airport. A local Ramakrishna devotee, Prabeer-babu, picked us up and brought us back to his home. It was a residence near central Bangkok, and I was to stay in their apartment. The three devotees accompanying me chose to stay at a nearby hotel. Prabeer-babu and his wife were great hosts, as were the other devotees in the same area. We had some refreshments and rested for a while. Then we headed for a Thai heritage center named Sampran, about an hour from Bangkok. Prabeer-babu showed us the Chao Phraya River that flows through Bangkok.

It was heartening to see a river in the middle of the Asian city without any garbage or filth. Thai people use the river both as a cherished landmark and a practical means of water transport. There are river cruises, tourist boats, and ordinary ferry services, which traverse the length and breadth of the main river and adjoining canals. There are around 15 existing commuter routes and the transport authority is planning another 28 such services in future. When we think about rejuvenating the rivers in India, it might be helpful to think about how conservation goals and heritage goals can be aligned with commercial goals. Bangkok showed us that it was a profitable way to sustainable development.

At the Heritage Center, we were served a sumptuous lunch at a restaurant that looked like a boat and was surrounded by the river. Prabeerbabu and Mandira-devi were fluent in the Thai language and customs—they have been living in Thailand for decades. They made sure we had enough spring rolls to remember till we visit Bangkok again. A special attraction was a variety of cooked with coconut, which reminded me of a typical Bengali dish, Daab Curry. Also fascinating were the greetings of the Thai staffs. They fold their hands together using the same gesture we

Indians do for Namaskaram. It is used while bidding farewell also. This Thai greeting is called Wai and has various levels depending on the social status of the other person. Buddha statues and monks deserve the highest level of Wai, whereas friends have the basic level, and everyone else receives in-between.

. After lunch we went to check out the cultural center. The three accompanying devotees enjoyed the musical show, while I was out and about checking out the cultural exhibits. The whole setting was like an old Thai village. After an hour or so, we headed back. We had a community program scheduled in the evening, and I wanted to be rested and prepared for my talk.

For the evening program we met in the community hall of the same building where I was staying. The program was a talk to be delivered by me, followed by a community dinner. We started the program with paying obeisance to the images of the Holy Trinity. We discussed about religious practices and life challenges. The audience, comprised of local Indian devotees, was enthusiastic during the interactive question-answer session. We had a potluck community dinner.



Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport – a scene from mythical ocean churning



Cultural Program at the Heritage Center



Devotee Meet in Bangkok

On the next day we went for a quick site seeing tour led by another devotee, named Ruchira. We went first to the Grand Palace in the heart of Bangkok. The palace is not a single building but a collection of buildings and temples in a large complex. The most striking of all the buildings was the Dusit Maha Prasat. Like most of the palaces here the roof is multilayered and topped with a tall gilded spire. It is one of the best representations of Thai architecture. The palace is supposed to represent Mount Meru of Hindu mythology, which is thought to be the center of the universe.

Thailand is a Buddhist country, but the royal heritage, customs and nomenclature are steeped in Hindu influence. In the palace buildings, we saw so many Hindu Puranic figures, gods and goddesses. Vishnu and his mount Garuda can be seen everywhere. There is a representation of Mount Kailasa there. Kings take the name Rama in this constitutional monarchy, and there is even a city called Ayutthaya (i.e. Ayodhya from Ramayana).

Coming back to the palace complex, I need to mention the temple of the Emerald Buddha. The legend says that it was made by Nagasena, a saint in Pataliputra (Patna), and was moved from there to Sri Lanka. Then it was supposed to go to Burma, on a royal invitation, but ended up shipwrecked in Cambodia. After the Thai army captured Angkor



Dusit Palace Roof Work

Wat in the fifteenth century, it was brought to Thailand via Laos. The temple has a royal grandeur, with mosaic pillars, marble pediments and orange tiles. The Emerald Buddha sits on a golden altar surrounded by golden decorations. I led a small prayer to Buddha with the accompanying devotees.

We came out of the temple and checked the murals on the compound walls, which depicted various scenes from the Ramayana. On the very day we visited the palace, there was a large gathering of Chinese tourists. They reminded us how many virtues and vices we neighbors across Himalayas share! Shouting, fighting, pushing around in the temple—all was there. I felt thirsty and had to take a break. One of the accompanying devotees approached a Thai Security guard and asked for a restroom. At first he did not seem to care, but when I was pointed at and he noticed me wearing the ochre dress, the officer, himself, led me to a VIP restroom. That is another remarkable feature of this country—the spontaneous as well as institutionalized respect for monks. There are unscrupulous persons who have taken advantage of the Thai's respect for monks, but Thais never back down from their custom.

We came out of the palace and bought some refreshments from the stalls outside.

One curious find was a small sized pineapple—very sweet, with an amazing bright yellow color, perfectly skinned and packed in individual wraps in cold storage. After the long walk under the blazing sun for the better part of the morning, the cold juicy comfort of that pineapple was amazing. The Thai coconut water didn't disappoint either. Satisfied with our fruity break, we moved on to our car for the next destination—the reclining Buddha temple or Wat Pho.

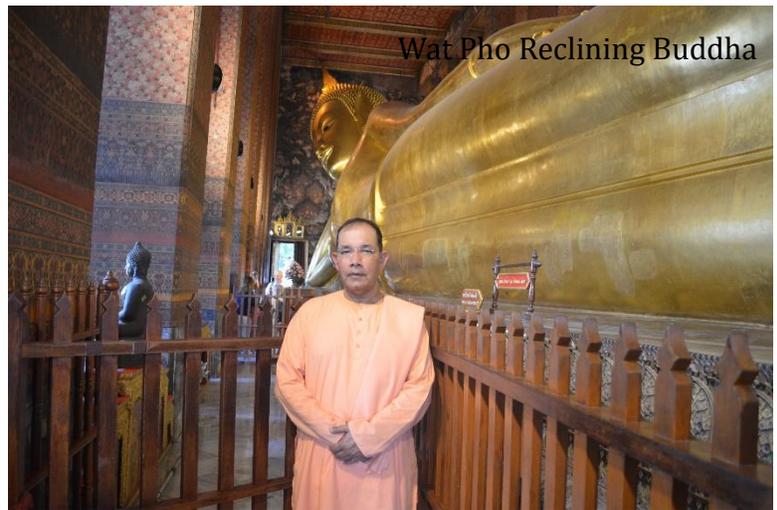
Wat Pho is one of the oldest temples in Bangkok. It was there even before Bangkok became the capital. When King Rama I, the founder of the current Royal family in Thailand, established Bangkok, he rebuilt the temple complex. Rama III built the famous attraction, the reclining Buddha and the associated chapel, in late 19th century. The reclining image of Buddha is huge—it is 15 m high and 46 m long. The posture of the image is referred to as the posture of a reclining or sleeping lion. It is supposed to represent the final resting of the lion of Sakya clan. There are 108 bronze bowls lining the corridor of the temple that are supposed to represent the many godly qualities of Buddha. Visitors drop coins in those bowls to earn merit—which actually helps as a contribution to run the temple complex. There is another temple in the complex, named Phra Ubosot, which hosts a great image of Buddha in lotus posture on a huge golden pedestal. The exterior of that temple is decorated with 150 depictions of Ramayana

scenes. Phra Ubosot contains hundreds of Buddha images. There are also outdoor urns that contain ashes of the royal family members, as well as, supposed relics of Buddha. The whole complex is a mixture of historical and religious importance. It was also the first public university in the country that taught traditional science, arts, medicine and religion. There is still a traditional school of medicine (like Ayurveda in India) in the same complex. The grandeur of the place was fascinating. Time was limited—so we left for the Golden Buddha temple.

The Golden Buddha temple, which is located in Wat Traimit in Bangkok's Chinatown, houses a Buddha image made of solid gold, weighing 5500 kilograms, which has a material value of a quarter billion US dollars, beyond the historical significance. There is an interesting history behind the Golden Buddha. Though the actual time when the statue was made is unknown, the kind of Indian influence (known as Sukhothai art) seen in the style of the image, allowed historians to fix the date sometime during the 13th to 14th century. There is a high chance that the statue was cast in India. The statue was moved to the old Thai capital city of Ayutthaya in 1403 and then somehow disappeared from public view. The legend says that Buddhist monks, who were in charge of the associated temple, completely plastered the image with stucco and colored glass to prevent it from being stolen by attacking Burmese invaders



Dusit Palace Ground Royal Family Urns



Wat Pho Reclining Buddha



Golden Buddha at Wat Traimit



Appreciating Art Works by Anita Bose

. The Ayutthaya kingdom was destroyed by the invaders in 1767, the city was plundered, and the monks were killed, and the secret of the Golden Buddha disappeared with them. The statue remained in the ruins of the city for a long time without attracting attention.

When Rama I established Bangkok as the new capital, he ordered old Buddha images from all the temples throughout the kingdom, that had fallen into disrepair, to be brought to Bangkok. So, this particular image was also brought in and kept in an unassuming Buddhist temple, like many such temples in Bangkok. For 200 years no one knew the true identity of the statue. Later, during the mid 1950s, while installing the statue in a new temple, the statue slipped from the rope and a portion of stucco cover chipped off revealing the golden image inside. The statue was then carefully brought back to its original form. The lotus postured image of Buddha depicts the moment of Buddha's enlightenment—eyes half opened with the love for suffering humanity and half closed to the transitory nature of the world. We spent some time in the associated exhibition center that tells the history of the statue. We bowed before the image a final time and left.

Time was running out fast. We were supposed to be at Anita Bose's place for lunch. But, our local

companion for the morning, Ruchira, wanted to visit her place briefly, so we went there for a quick cup of coffee. On our way back, we saw the Brahma temple, which is quite an uncommon sight in India. It was built by a Thai Government agency to seek blessings for a nearby construction. We didn't have time to get down from the car, so we offered pranam to the deity from the car and moved on.

Anita arranged a great feast for the lunchtime with all the Bengali fish preparations, curries, and desserts—the accompanying devotees had a great time. Anita has multiple artistic talents—she picked up different Indian folk art styles as she accompanied her husband on a transferrable job in different parts of India and abroad. After lunch, she showed many paintings she made, following Indian folk styles of Madhubani, Kalamkari, Tanjore, Patachitra, etc.

The Flight to Cambodia was scheduled in the late afternoon. So, we made a reluctant exit from the energetic company of the Bangkok devotees. Prabeer-babu made sure we left the place to reach Bangkok airport on time. The next destination was the old temple complex of Angkor Wat in Seam Reap city of Cambodia. My excitement grew in anticipation of experiencing the biggest Hindu Temple complex in the world.

Introduction to the Cover Page: The Fire That Is Sri Ramakrishna

Br. Panchatapa

Sri Ramakrishna was born on 2nd day of the waxing moon in the month of Falgun that usually comes during February-March according to Gregorian calendar. Sri Ramakrishna is the embodiment of Knowledge. He is Sat-chit-ananda Brahman, the support cause of the manifested universe and beyond. He is beyond three qualities (Sattwa, Raja, Tama) as also beyond three states of waking, dream and dreamless sleep.

From a letter written to M. by Ashwini Kumar Dutta: "Another day, probably in 1883, I visited the Master with a few young men from Srirampore. Looking at them, he asked, 'Why have they come here?'
Myself: "To see you."

Master: "What's there to see in me? Why don't they look at the buildings and temples?"

Myself: "Sir, they haven't come to see those things. They have come to see you."

Master: "Ah! Then they must be flints. There is fire in them. You may keep a flint under water a thousand years, but the moment you strike it, sparks come out. They must be of that type. But it will be useless to try to strike fire out of me!"

In the blazing fire of Sri Ramakrishna when one offers oneself wholeheartedly as an oblation all stored karma gets burnt out. In the Gospel, Sri Ramakrishna says, "When a fire is feeble it goes out when even a small stick is thrown into it; but a blazing fire is not affected even if a plantain-tree is thrown into it. The tree itself is burnt to ashes".

M's record on Saturday, April 5, 1884 reads, "What is the use of sowing a boiled paddy grain? It will never bring forth a shoot. Likewise, if a man is boiled in the fire of Knowledge, he will not be used for new creation. He is liberated."

To attain liberation through the touch of the fire, that is Sri Ramakrishna, one has to have fire like dispassion, follow spiritual discipline and seek holy company. In Master's words: "One can realize God if one feels intense dispassion for worldly things. A

man with such dispassion feels that the world is like a forest on fire. He regards his wife and children as a deep well. If he really feels that kind of dispassion, he renounces home and family. It is not enough for him to live in the world in a spirit of detachment.

About the 'necessity of spiritual discipline' the Master instruction is: "... at the beginning the aspirant should go into solitude now and then. Spiritual discipline is necessary. You want to eat rice; suppose you sit down somewhere and say, 'Wood contains fire and fire cooks rice.' Can saying it cook the rice? You must get two pieces of wood and by rubbing them together bring out the fire". Not only knowing that we are Brahman but to 'realize' this is the goal. He says, "What is vijnana? It is knowing God in a special way. The awareness and conviction that fire exists in wood is jnana, knowledge. But to cook rice on that fire, eat the rice, and get nourishment from it is vijnana. To know by one's inner experience that God exists is jnana. But to talk to Him, to enjoy Him as Child, as Friend, as Master, as Beloved, is vijnana. The realization that God alone has become the universe and all living beings is vijnana."

Along with spiritual practice "One should always seek the company of holy men. The nearer you approach the Ganges, the cooler the breeze will feel. Again, the nearer you go to a fire, the hotter the air will feel".

And, faith. Sri Ramakrishna said to His doctor "Look here. If a man truly believes that God alone does everything, that He is the Operator and man the machine, then such a man is verily liberated in life. 'Thou workest Thine own work; men only call it theirs.' Do you know what it is like? Vedanta philosophy gives an illustration. Suppose you are cooking rice in a pot, with potato, eggplant, and other vegetables. After a while the potatoes, eggplant, rice, and the rest begin to jump about in the pot. They seem to say with pride: 'We are moving! We are jumping!' The children see it and think the potatoes, eggplant, and rice are alive and so they jump that way. But the elders, who know,

explain to the children that the vegetables and the rice are not alive; they jump not of themselves, but because of the fire under the pot; if you remove the burning wood from the hearth, then they will move no more." ... "The 'I consciousness' identified with the senses says, 'I am jumping about.' And Satchidananda is the fire."

Sri Ramakrishna is the *Adhishthan-agni*, the fire behind this manifested universe. We recall here an incident that took place on January 5, 1884. *"It was about eight o'clock in the evening. Sri Ramakrishna asked Mahimacharan to recite a few hymns from the scriptures. Mahima read the first verse of the Uttara Gita, describing the nature of the Supreme Brahman: He, Brahman, is one, partless, stainless, and beyond the ether; without beginning or end, unknowable by mind or intelligence.*

Finally he came to the seventh verse of the third chapter, which reads: The twice-born worships the Deity in fire, The munis contemplate Him in the heart, Men of limited wisdom see Him in the image, And the yogis who have attained samesightedness Behold Him everywhere.

No sooner did the Master hear the words "the yogis who have attained samesightedness" than he stood up and went into samadhi, his arm supported by the splint and bandage. Speechless, the devotees looked at this yogi who had himself attained the state of samesightedness."

Sri Ramakrishna also pointed out to the changes that happen when the 'fire' touches one. During His conversation with Keshab Sen on Wednesday, November 28, 1883, Sri Ramakrishna explained clearly what are changes that take place. He says, *"Do you know what actually happens? When a house is on fire, at first a few things inside burn. Then comes the great commotion. Just so, the fire of Knowledge at first destroys such enemies of spiritual life as passion, anger, and so forth. Then comes the turn of ego. And lastly a violent commotion is seen in the physical frame"*. He put another example before His students to explain it better. *"Even after attaining Knowledge, the Jnani keeps his body as before. But the fire of Knowledge burns away his lust and other*

passions. Many days ago, during an electric storm, a thunderbolt struck the Kali temple. We saw that no injury had been done to the doors; only the points of the screws were broken. The doors are the body, and the passions-lust and so forth-are the screws."

Naturally, at this point a question comes to a spiritual seeker's mind, how much austerity to perform to purify ourselves?

There are people whom Sri Ramakrishna named "The *nityasiddha*". They are in a class apart. In His words, *"The nityasiddha is like arani wood. A little rubbing produces fire. You can get fire from it even without rubbing. The nityasiddha realizes God by practising slight spiritual discipline and sometimes without practising any at all. But he does practise spiritual discipline after realizing God."*

For others, *"Knowledge and love-both are paths leading to God. Those who follow the path of love have to observe a little more outer purity. But the violation of this by a man following the path of knowledge cannot injure him. It is destroyed in the fire of knowledge"*. [Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, May 20, 1883].

He clarified this point with an example: *"Why do I attract these boys to me so much? They are pure vessels untouched by worldliness. A man cannot assimilate instruction if his mind is stained with worldliness. Milk can be safely kept in a new pot; but it turns sour if kept in a pot in which curd has been made. You may wash a thousand times a cup that has held a solution of garlic, but still you cannot remove the smell. ... "All smell disappears when a blazing fire is lighted. If you heat the cup smelling of garlic, you get rid of the smell; it becomes a new cup."* [Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Wednesday, February 25, 1885]

But there is no need to light the fire going through so much austerities. Sri Ramakrishna assured by saying, *"... one man lights a fire and ten bask in its heat. ... It is good to remain on the plane of Lila after reaching the Nitya. ... The Lila is real too."* [Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, June 5, 1883] He did all austerities, we are just to meditate on His Lila.

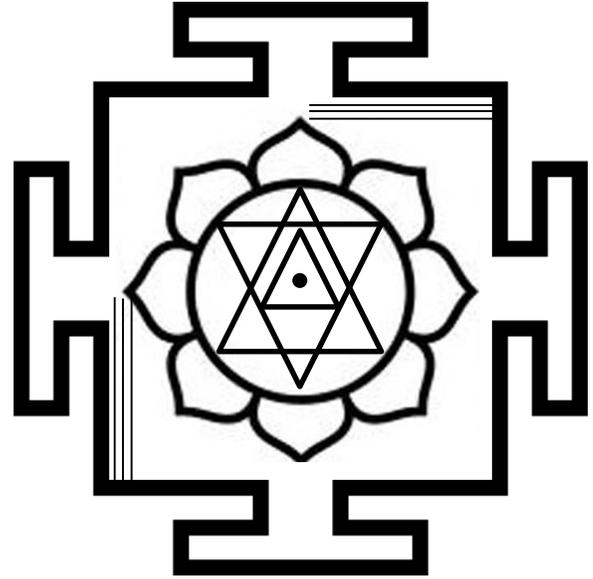
We can heat ourselves up in the Sri Ramakrishna-Agni. Actually, this cover image is inspired by Sri Ramakrishna's vision. The Master said, "I had direct visions of those things. One day, I was passing back of the Kuthi when my whole body burst into flames, as it were, like the fire in a homa. ..." [Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Friday, October 23, 1885]

Homa is one of the important rituals to be performed during His birth tithi puja. Why to perform homa fire? A homa is a "votive ritual" where the fire accepts the offering and grants the fulfillment to the worshipper. The fulfillment of the self comes when it sees itself One with the Self. Sri Ramakrishna teaches, "Believe in the form of God. It is only after attaining Brahmajnana that one sees non-duality, the oneness of Brahman and Its Sakti. Brahman and Sakti are identical, like fire and its power to burn. When a man thinks of fire, he must also think of its power to burn. Again, when he thinks of the power to burn, he must also think of fire." Here lies the importance of performing Sri Ramakrishna homa.

The homa base contains three east and three north facing lines. Three lines in the east stand for Mukunda (one name of Vishnu that means the giver of liberation), Ishana (God) and Purandar (one name of Indra that means the destroyer of fort). When the obeisance is paid, first the ultimate one is mentioned followed by the 2nd level and then the stage where most us are standing. Likewise, the three lines facing north are worshipped in the following way: first line: Om! Obeisance to Brahman; middle line: Om! Obeisance to Vivaswan (Sun); last line: Om! Obeisance to Indu (moon). Brahma-jyoti is the final one. Sun shines on its own brightness and chandra-jyoti, moonlight comes as the last in the scale of brightness.

Next is the lotus mandala. Mandala literary means circle. According to ancient Hindu scriptures mandalas stand for creativity, of powerful existence and a symbol of deeper connection with the self and the universe at large.

In Hinduism lotus is a symbol of the virtues of the human soul, and how it can break down all physical barriers that limit its ascension.



Before starting Sri Ramakrishna Puja, the solar, lunar and fire spheres get obeisance as:

Am arka-mandalaya dwadasha-kala-atmane namah (there are 12 solar months and each month has one name of Sun. Therefore 12 components of Sun is called *dwadasha-kala*).

Um soma-mandalaya shodasha-kala-atmane namah (there are 16 phases of moon including fullmoon and new moon)

Mam vahni-mandalaya dasa-kala-atmane namah (there are 10 types of fires namely *jataveda*, *vaishwanara*, etc). In the beginning of each offering a seed-mantra or beeja-manta is put. In this series if the first letters are collected, one would see A-U-M, which symbolizes nothing but Brahman alone.

On August 20, 1883 Monday we see that Master is telling M: "Like the Akasa, Brahman is without any modification. It has become manifold because of Sakti. Again, Brahman is like fire, which itself has no colour. The fire appears white if you throw a white substance into it, red if you throw a red, black if you throw a black. The three gunas-sattva, rajas, and tamas-belong to Sakti alone. Brahman Itself is beyond the three gunas. What Brahman is cannot be described. It is beyond words. That which remains after everything is eliminated by the Vedantic process of 'Not this, not this', and which is of the nature of Bliss, is Brahman.

Suppose the husband of a young girl has come to his father-in-law's house and is seated in the drawing-room with other young men of his age. The girl and her friends are looking at them through the window. Her friends do not know her husband and ask her, pointing to one young man, 'Is that your husband?' 'No', she answers, smiling. They point to another young man and ask if he is her husband. Again she answers no. They repeat the question, referring to a third, and she gives the same answer. At last they point to her husband and ask, 'Is he the one?' She says neither yes nor no, but only smiles and keeps quiet. Her friends realize that he is her husband. ... One becomes silent on realizing the true nature of Brahman."

These A-U-M represents three states, namely, waking, dream and deep sleep. Brahman is the *bindu* beyond these three states. The girl, in His example, could express three times but at the 4th state she became speechless.

There are three triangles for three states and a dot at the center that stands for the 4th state, *turiya*.

While offering the homage to the fire it is uttered: *Om rang vahni murtaye namah* (form of blazing fire)

Om rang vahni chaitanyaya namah (the consciousness the pulsates in the fire). It is interesting to note that how fire an inert object is seen as a form of consciousness. Then, homage is offered to this conscious fire.

In this fire, Indra and other kinds of gods get their shares. Then Sri Ramakrishna is invoked in this fire and is named after Him. Offerings are made to all gods once again seeing them One with Sri Ramakrishna.

Further the worshipper offers oblation saying 'Om Aim Swaha' for eleven times considering his/her oneness with the fire and Sri Ramakrishna.

Not only traditional gods but also the consort of Sri Ramakrishna and all the direct disciples are offered oblations. Ma Sarada is the *shakti* of Sri Ramakrishna, while each of His direct disciple manifests a unique aspect of Sri Ramakrishna.

As Rabindranath Tagore wrote:

"From the altar of sacrifice of the Supreme Support of the universe, the fire of my self-homa is lighted up. I offer myself as the oblation in that fire, in the hope of liberation."

Therefore, self-oblation is offered to the fire that is Sri Ramakrishna with this prayer:

ॐ इतपूर्व प्राण-बुद्धि-देह-धर्मादिकारतो जागत्-स्वप्न-सुषुप्ति-
अवस्थाषु मनसा बाचा कर्मणा हस्त्याभ्यां पद्भ्यामुदरेण शिश्रा-
यत्कृतं यदुक्तं यत्स्मृतं तत् सर्वं ब्रह्मार्पणं स्वाहा।
मां मदीयञ्च सकलं श्रीरामकृष्णचरणे समर्पये।

*om itapūrvam prāṇa-buddhi-deha-dharmādikārato
jāgat-svapna-susupti abasthāsu manasā bācā karmaṇā
hastyābhyāṃ padbhyāmudareṇa śīśnā-yatkṛtaṃ
yaduktam yatsmṛtam tat sarvaṃ brahmārpaṇam svāhā.
mām madīyañca sakalam śrīrāmakṛṣṇacarane
samarpaye.*

I, who am an embodied being endowed with intellect, life breath, and their functions, now offer up all my actions and their fruits to the fire of Brahman. No matter what I may have done, said or thought in waking, dreaming or dreamless sleep, with my mind, my tongue, my hands or my other limbs may all these be offered to Brahman. I offer up myself and all I have at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna.



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