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EDITORIAL

Unite All Religions Against All Irreligion

A group of dignified people were approaching the magnificent new building, which would soon house the Art Institute of Chicago. They represented ten religions of the world and were in a procession on Michigan Avenue. Their followers were holding the symbols of the religions. Pedestrians were observing this unique sight with awe. Some of them were cheering and clapping with great joy.

The moment the procession of religious leaders reached the broad and long steps of the Art Institute, a bell started ringing to announce the epic event. When the procession, headed by Cardinal Gibbons, entered the Hall of Columbus (now known as Fullerton Hall), the audience of four thousand people stood up.

All the leaders went onto the stage and took their seats. At 10:00 AM on the dot, a unique event in human history began.

This was the first time—on September 11, 1893—that all religions united against all irreligion.

Swami Vivekananda, a 30-year old Sannyasi from India, represented Hinduism. He was the disciple of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, a unique spiritual personality, who for the first time in religious history, practiced different religious paths and also the three main paths in Hinduism: Bhakti, Tantra and Vedanta, and propounded, "All paths lead to the same goal."

Being a yogi par excellence, Sri Ramakrishna knew the past, present and future of every human being. Long before 1893, he wrote for all those who were near him, "Naren (pre-monastic name of Swami Vivekananda) will teach inside the country and also in foreign countries." His prophecy became true on the afternoon of September 11, 1893 in Chicago, when Swami Vivekananda gave a call to all humanity, urging them to be free from ignorance—ignorance that blindfolded a person

and hid the reality, the truth that there is only one existence, which is all-pervading, eternal, and never changing.

He thundered, "Shake off weakness, weakness is sin. Be strong physically, mentally, and spiritually, and be free. Freedom, freedom, freedom is the first condition of growth. Freedom, freedom, freedom is the song of the soul." Swami Vivekananda's soul-touching words raised him to the position of a world teacher — a Jagat Guru.

One who helps people to overcome their ignorance and leads them to the path of enlightenment is considered a preceptor, a spiritual teacher — a Guru. A true guru never works with any selfish motive. He never differentiates between people, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated. He treats everyone the same. Same-sightedness is the first quality of a spiritual teacher. After the realization of God, which is love and unselfishness, the guru, himself, becomes the embodiment of love and unselfishness.

Swami Vivekananda's heart was full of love for people. In very simple terms, he described Advaita Vedanta — "Jiva is Brahman and nothing else." (Jiva Brahma Eva Na Aparā). In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "I worship that God whom, by mistake, you call as man." To an American friend he once mentioned, "I shall have to take birth again, because I have fallen in love with human beings."

Swami Vivekananda's unselfish love embraced the whole of humanity without any distinction of religion, caste, creed, color, sex or nationality.

India no doubt was the queen of his adoration, not because it was his birthplace, but for the wonderful spiritual qualities that were discovered and nurtured there for centuries. Without these high moral qualities, humans would have become no better than animals. The acme of these moral

qualities is Advaita Vedanta.

The core teaching of Advaita Vedanta is, "Truth is one and not two (Ekam ev Advaityam)". Swami Vivekananda, the unique guru of the world, taught this in a simple lucid way, "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity."

Like a true guru, he not only pointed out the goal, but he also gave people the means to reach the goal. He taught four yogas, the four traditional paths to realize Oneness.

The Rishis of old always encouraged us to follow both Abhudaya, the development of material prosperity, and Nishreyasa, spiritual development. For various reasons, India forgot to practice both the paths. The Buddhist idea that this world is full of misery (Sarva Dukham), and Shankaracharya's "Brahma Satya Jagat Mitha" ("Brahman is the only Reality and the world is illusory") confused people. They neither dedicated themselves to worldly prosperity, nor did they have the capacity to practice spirituality

wholeheartedly. Misinterpretation of the scriptures and weak leadership made the society vulnerable to foreign invasion. Lack of intellectual brilliance and military valor forced India and Hinduism to be under foreign rulers for century after century.

The rejuvenation of India from the slumber of ignorance and the quagmire of superstition was no less work than lifting a hill on the finger. This yeoman task was reserved for Swami Vivekananda. God chose him, trained him for the task, and finally poured the divine power into him.

In Kurukshetra Lord Krishna gathered all the good and righteous people into one camp and the bad, unrighteous people into another and blew his conch to establish Dharma.

In Chicago Swami Vivekananda stood on the platform of the first Parliament of World's Religion, where all religion assembled against all irreligion, and poured the nectar of Vedanta through his words and the power of the world teacher — Jagat Guru.



Durga puja, the Autumnal worship of the Divine Mother is around the corner. An excerpt from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna:

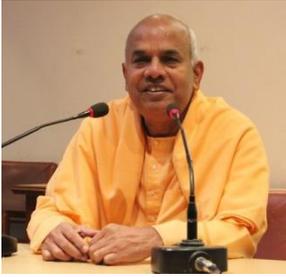
Sunday, September 14, 1884

A little later the Master was standing on the west porch. Since it was autumn, he had put on a flannel shirt dyed with ochre. He asked Narendra, "Is it true that you sang the Agamani?"

Accompanied by Narendra and M., Sri Ramakrishna walked to the embankment of the Ganges. Narendra sang the Agamani:

Tell me, my Uma, how have you fared, alone in the Stranger's house? People speak so much ill of us! Alas, I die of shame! My Son-in-law smears His body with ashes from the funeral pyre and roams about in great delight; You too, along with Him, cover with ash your golden skin. He begs the food that He eats! How can I bear it, being your mother? This time, when He returns to claim you, I shall say to Him, "My daughter Uma is not at home."

Sri Ramakrishna stood listening to the song and went into samadhi. The sun was still above the horizon as the Master stood on the embankment in the ecstatic mood. On one side of him was the Ganges, flowing north with the flood-tide. Behind him was the flower garden. To his right one could see the nahabat and the Panchavati. Narendra stood by his side and sang. Gradually the darkness of evening fell upon the earth.



Concept of Guru: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Tradition

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This article is based on the talk delivered at the Guru Purnima (online) retreat organized by the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

Namaste! Dear devotees and friends, greetings to each one of you who are listening to this talk right now and who may be doing so at some time later. On behalf of the devotees and friends of Vedanta in Brazil, I convey our heartiest greetings, loving best wishes and prayers for your good health and that of your family members and friends. I am grateful to my brother monk, Swami Ishatmanandaji, for inviting me to participate in this online retreat on "The Concept of Guru in Indian Tradition".

I start with the mantra:

*akhanda mandalaakaaram vyaaptam yena
caraacaram tatpadam darshitam yena tasmai sri gurave
namah*

"Salutations to the Supreme Guru, whose nature is an Indivisible ever Presence and by whom is pervaded all the moving and nonmoving beings. Salutation to that Supreme Guru by whose grace one is able to touch the feet of His visible manifestation!"

You will be listening to the illuminating talks on the subject of this retreat from other speakers very soon. I shall share with you some ideas on the subject, especially in relation to Sri Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition.

When you say the word Guru, naturally there comes the other part, Shishya, that is student or disciple. The phrase Guru-Shishya parampara or teacher-disciple tradition or teacher-student lineage denotes an uninterrupted series of succession of teachers and disciples in ancient Hindu religion and tradition. It can also be found in various schools of yoga and in other religions like Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, (Tibetan and the Zen tradition) etc. It is the tradition of spiritual relationship where the teachings are transmitted

from a teacher or guru to a shishya or disciple. It is considered that the spiritual relationship goes beyond earthly life existence. In human life, except some, most relationships are seemingly very complex and complicated, and they get into all sorts of problems and eventually broken in many cases. But, the spiritual relation is the only relationship that it can restart anytime, anywhere, even if it is seemingly disconnected for some reason for some time. Because it is not concerned with most of the things at the human level as such. So, it goes beyond all relationships that we see in day to day life. It can restart without any rancor of the past because it transcends any relationship developed at the human level.

On the part of the guru, it is based on the experiential knowledge of the highest wisdom, Self-knowledge or God realization, truthfulness, genuineness and unconditional love for sincere seekers for their welfare and spiritual growth. On the part of the student, it demonstrates deep respect, commitment, devotion, obedience, understanding and service.

The scriptures declare that the knowledge gained from an illumined teacher alone becomes fruitful. The idea is that the guru not only gives the mantra to the disciple but also transmits with it some of the spiritual power he possesses. You may read mantras from books and try to practice them, but the effect is very little.

A guru serves not only as a spiritual master but also as a counselor, who helps to mold values in the disciple's life. That is very important! The teacher leads an exemplary life, and sets himself or herself as a model. It is considered that only a master who has realized God can rightfully teach others about the highest truth.

Today we shall briefly see how the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition holds these lofty ideals in the modern day world. I shall begin with a beautiful explanation of guru-sishya or teacher-student and the importance of the guru by Vivekananda on this subject. In Bhakti yoga, he said "Each soul is destined to be perfect and every being will in the end will attain the state of perfection. Whatever we are now is the result of our acts and thoughts in the past, and whatever we shall be in the future will be the result of what we think and do now. But this, the shaping of our own destiny does not preclude our receiving help from outside. Nay, in the vast majority of cases such help is absolutely necessary. When it comes, the higher powers and possibilities of the soul are quickened, spiritual life is awakened, growth is animated, and man becomes holy and perfect in the end. This quickening impulse cannot be derived from books. The soul can only receive impulses from another soul, and from nothing else. We may study books all our lives, we may become very intellectual, but in the end we find that we have not developed at all spiritually... To quicken the spirit, that impulse must come from another soul. The person from whose soul such an impulse comes is called the guru--the teacher; and the person to whose soul the impulse is conveyed is called a shishya -- student. To convey such an impulse to any soul, in the first place, the soul from which it proceeds must possess the power of transmitting it, as it were, to another; and in the second place, the soul to which it is transmitted must be fit to receive it. The seed must be a living seed, and the field must be ready ploughed; and when both these conditions are fulfilled, a wonderful growth of genuine religion takes place.

1) An illumined teacher:

In our case, we have a great tradition. We have an illumined teacher! As I said before first of all there must be an illumined teacher, and in our tradition we have is Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna said "in every age God incarnates himself as the Guru to teach humanity." It is a

great fortune, great opportunity that in this life we have come across the life and teachings of an extraordinary teacher Sri Ramakrishna, that religious history has ever seen. Sri Ramakrishna lived and breathed Brahman, the Supreme Reality, which is the source of all wisdom, power and strength. Since his advent, he has inspired millions in the path of spirituality and continues to inspire millions and millions all over the world. He demonstrated what true spirituality means, what is the goal of human life, what all the practices one could imagine and the results one could obtain, and what unconditional love means—everything he has explained and demonstrated in his own life. He became the personification of the highest wisdom, the pure joy that could never be got from the objects. One wonders how anyone on earth could have had such detachment to the things of the world. In matters of spiritual experience, there is no question that is left unanswered.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that "Satchidananda alone is the guru. If a man in the form of a guru awakens spiritual consciousness in you, then know for certain that it is God himself, the Absolute, that has assumed that human form for your sake. The guru is like a companion, who leads you by the hand." Satchidananda is the impersonal aspect of the Reality, and to meditate on the impersonal is not that easy. For the devotee's sake He assumes a human form. For us Sri Ramakrishna was and is the personification of that Reality in human form. He is the "Acaryanam Mahacarya," the highest teacher among teachers.

In this connection one important point has to be remembered. Sri Ramakrishna used to say "Brahman and Shakti are two aspects of one and the same Reality. They cannot be separated. Just as sun and its brilliance, milk and its whiteness, the fire and its burning power cannot be separated, so is Brahman and Shakti. It is the Divine Mother who spoke through Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, "Oh Mother! Thou art the operator and I am the machine, Thou art the indweller and I am the house. Pointing to his own

body he used to say, Thou art the driver, I am the carriage, I move as thou movest me, I do as Thou makest me do, I speak as Thou makest me speak! She is the owner of the storehouse of wisdom." So, in Sri Ramakrishna we have an extraordinary demonstration of the Reality of God with all the exemplary qualities. Just imagine with whom we are connected when you say that Sri Ramakrishna is our Ishta, the chosen ideal, our Supreme Guru. As we are talking to each other, as we are seeing each other, we are all connected with the family of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother and Swamiji. What a great blessing it is that we are connected with such a great avatara of this age.

(2) Now, I come to the second point: the uninterrupted series of succession of teachers and disciples. It is one of the important aspects that is very much needed in spiritual practice. The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition has it all and maintains it fully. First, Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda, and other direct disciples, and then their disciples, and so on! It is a continuous flow of spiritual power and grace to generations. Sometimes we see Gurus and Babas come in numbers to the West, as we all know very well, and they initiate people and go away. Soon doubts and confusion arise in the mind of the aspirants, and they do not know what to do. I have come across quite a few instances here. Who will clear the doubts, and where to seek the answers? They get lost! In the case of the Ramakrishna - Vivekananda tradition, there is an unbroken chain of teachers exist. Even if there is an absence of the physical existence of a teacher, the aspirant can get the doubt cleared, the confusion erased, and the obstacles removed and they can move on with their practice. For example, the teacher who initiated a devotee is no more in physical form, but by getting in touch with the President, Vice Presidents or any competent teacher of our Order one's doubts could be cleared. This kind of lineage, which is an important aspect of spiritual growth, is fully maintained in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda

tradition.

(3) Then, the third important point is the flow of spiritual power and grace. As a result of the above two points, as I have explained, there comes the continuous flow of wisdom, spiritual power, and grace to the disciples. Normally, we do not realize how much grace of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ma, or Swamiji has come to us. Many were the moments in our lives that we almost lost hope and became desperate to the extent of feeling life becoming a curse and even wanting to end life itself. But, if we are sincere in our attempt and seek guidance, certainly the grace of the guru will show the way and to overcome every challenge in life.

As an example, let us look at M's life—his first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna. This epoch-making event of his life came about in a very strange way. M belonged to a joint family with several members. Some ten years after he began his career as an educationist, bitter quarrels broke out among the family members, driving the sensitive M to despair and utter despondency. To make the story short, he lost all interest in life, left home and he was thinking of putting an end to his life. At last, he went to one of his friend's house, who happened to take him to Sri Ramakrishna. When he first met Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna very affectionately enquired about his life, and M explained his plight. Sri Ramakrishna who perceived the desperation in M and his resolve to take leave of this world out of desperation, instilled a new faith and hope into M by His gracious words of assurance: "God forbid! Why should you think of taking leave of this world? Do you not feel blessed by discovering your guru? By his grace, what is beyond all imagination and dream can be easily achieved." Just imagine this scene! At the very first sight Sri Ramakrishna showered His grace unconditionally. M realized in his very first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna that what is beyond dreams and imagination can be achieved through the grace of the guru. That is where we have to focus our

attention. M used to say later on, “Behold! Where is the resolve to end life and where is the discovery of God!” So, we are in connection with the marvelous life and teachings of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition. Let us remember it always.

(4) Then, another aspect of the true spiritual guru is unconditional love for the disciples. What an unconditional love Sri Ramakrishna showered in an extraordinary way on his disciples. Such examples are plenty! Look at the life of Girish Ghosh, who used to say that he was a hundred percent confirmed sinner! What a change Sri Ramakrishna brought in him! Girish learned that the guru is one who silently unfolds the disciple’s inner life. Or, take the case of Kalipada Ghosh who was a drunkard! True divine personality do not decide and act on the basis of weaknesses of the disciple even though they perceive them. Rather seeing their inner potentiality he showered His unconditional love and made compassion and grace flow. We have so many examples in the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. Holy Mother Sarada Devi was the personification of infinite love. No matter who the person was—Sarat, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and Amzad, a dacoit, both were seen by Mother on the same level as Her sons. What an example of unconditional love! Sometimes Swami Vivekananda used to scold his disciple right and left in the strongest language, and like a child the next moment forget them all. Once, he even carried his own disciple on his shoulders. The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition has this unconditional love in its blood from the beginning, and it is flowing endlessly. We have been witnessing plenty of examples of this unconditional love from the teacher to the disciple, and how it is coming down to us.

(5) And the fifth point, I would like to mention is about practice. The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition insists on regular practice in spiritual life. Swami Vivekananda used to say, “An ounce of practice is far more better than tons of theory”. In Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition spiritual practice on a regular basis is well defined, clearly formulated and leaves no room for confusion or slackness. There is no outward show or drum beating or humbug in this. Besides spiritual guidance, the teachers also act as counselors and infuse character building values and confidence building measures in the aspirant. In moments of crisis at various stages of life, the students find in their teacher a true friend, philosopher and guide.

(6) Another point: Thousands of years ago, the caste system played an important role in the guru-disciple relationship. You may perhaps remember the story of Ekalavya in our scriptures and how he was refused to be initiated in the art of archery by Dronacharya just because he was son of a hunter. I do not have to elaborate it for want of time. In the Ramakrishna tradition this is not so. The times have changed, but the core values have been kept alive and in tact. In our tradition, anyone is free to seek spiritual practice and any qualified guru is free to give instructions to the seekers, and guide him or her in spiritual life. There is no caste for a true devotee, Sri Ramakrishna used to say.

These are some of the main points about the guru-disciple tradition in the Ramakrishna order. Of course there is another part, which is equally important—the disciple’s side. For lack of time I will just stop with this, maybe when the question/answer session comes I will touch on this subject. Thank you.





Concept of Guru: Monastic Order & Lay Devotees

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This article is based on the talk delivered at the Guru Purnima (online) retreat organized by the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

A Guru is necessary for the realization of the highest truth. What is a monastic order? Sri Ramakrishna says there are two kinds of renunciation. One is Inner and the other is Outer: Antar Sanyasi and Bahir Sanyasi. Antar Sanyasi is recommended for all. They are not attached to anything they live with. But for the monks, not only do they have to renounce internally, but they also have to renounce externally.

And why is this external renunciation important? So that you can be totally into the system and the practice! If you live in a house that has been freshly painted black, there is a chance that you will be stained. So, that is the reason you leave all the responsibilities of the worldly life. This external renunciation is recommended to lead a perfectly pure life, and that is called Sanyasa. But, that is not for all; that is for very few.

Sri Ramakrishna used to call the Inner Sanyasis hidden yogis. They are yogis, but people don't know that they are yogis. That is for the householders. That is necessary for the aspirants who want to realize the Truth, who want to realize God.

The word "monastic" comes from Monos, a Greek word, which means alone or solitary. Monks are without support, they have no possessions, no family relationships, no attachments. They are called monastics or monks or Sanyasins. Sanyasins want to live a life completely dedicated to God. They have tremendous purity. That tremendous renunciation is the one secret of spirituality according to Swami Vivekananda. To have this purity, you need a guide; you need someone to lead you; you need some inner inspiration, inner desire, to lead a very pure life devoted fully to God. But, who will guide you on the spiritual

path?

In Vedic times, people used to go to a Guru. Now, also, people go to a Guru. For sannyasins the Guru is a sanyasi, a monk. What type of Guru is a monk? A monk will say that in order to realize God, you have to practice spirituality. You may be detached from possessions; you may not have any attachment to the family or any desire, but that is not enough.

Sri Ramakrishna says that renunciation is not only giving up attachment to things, but the second and most important part of renunciation is loving God, getting attached to God, attached to the higher ideal. Without this higher attachment, the lower attachment will not go. If it does go, it will be a very peculiar state; it will be a very uncomfortable state for that person. It is very difficult for that person to realize the Truth. If one has no desire for any worldly attachment and yet is not devoted to the higher ideal, that is also not recommended. Scripture says that you cannot realize God without attachment to God.

*na karmena na prajena dhanena tyage naiche amritat
manesu.*

If you want the highest realization, you cannot do it by study alone. Having lots of work, lots of ritualistic worship, or lots of money, wealth or progeny, will not lead to realization. For realization you have to practice spirituality. For that you come to a Guru.

True renunciation cannot be done by the calculation that I want to renounce. It is a spontaneous desire that comes when the time is right. You know the story of Lala Babu in Bengal. He was a common person, but he heard a daughter say to her father, "Won't you burn your vasanas?"

She was the daughter of a washerman. For us "vasana" means desires, but for her vasana meant the banana/plantain leaves that had to be burnt, so they could be used to clean the dirty clothes, since soap was not there at that time. But when Lalu Babu heard this, he thought that he was getting near the end of his life, and there were still desires there. Spontaneously, desirelessness came to him, and he renounced everything and went to Vrindavan, where he led a holy life. So, that kind of renunciation happens.

You can have renunciation only when you have love for God. That's why it is said, "Jahan Ram, Tahan Nehin Kayak." "Where there is love for God, there is no attachment to the world." And also, "If you have too much attachment to the world, you can not love God."

When that type of renunciation comes, then one approaches a Guru in a monastic order. Now, what does the Guru do? He initiates an aspirant into monasticism—gives Sanyasa Diksha. Seeing and understanding what type of renunciation the person has, whether he is capable of leading a monastic life, he gives the Diksha. Sanyasa Diksha is preceded by Siksha or training. By training, they make the person fit, and then they give the Diksha. That has been our monastic tradition for giving Diksha. The ritual for getting the Sanyasa Diksha is called Viraja Homa. What type of Diksha is that? In Viraja Homa, one vows to renounce everything. What everything? All desires—desire for bodily comfort, desire for worldly comfort and even the desire for going to heaven—all those are renounced. Name and fame, wealth, desire for progeny, desire for body—all these are renounced to attain that Sanyasa. Swami Vivekananda used to say that Sanyasa means love of death. So, there is no fear of death, no desire for any support from the world, total dependence on God as the support of your life. As long as the Prarabdha goes on, God will support you. When that type of Viraja Homa is done, it is generally the abbot or head of the monastery that gives Sanyasa. In the Sankaracharya tradition, when they find a person

has lived a disciplined life and is becoming a Brahmachari, they give them Sanyasa and ask them to lead a monastic life, living alone, doing Parapjya or walking and living like a mendicant, living their lives to realize God.

In the Sanyasa systems, where there is a Sangha, like our Ramakrishna Mission or other monastic orders, Sanyasa is given after the person joins the order and has had nine or ten years of Siksha or training. He lives in the center and performs work for some time as his spiritual practice.

Karma Yoga is a sadhana. The best spiritual practice is prayer and meditation, but they have to be combined with Karma Yoga, i.e., doing something for the ashram, something for the people, as a part of the spiritual practice. That is how the Guru directs the disciple to lead a monastic life. That is how renunciation comes in the monastic life.

But what about the lay devotee? Should the lay devotee accept a Sanyasi as Guru? For the lay devotee there have been two types of gurus. One is called Kula Guru and another is the Sanyasin Guru or monastic teacher. Kula Gurus are priests, but they rarely practice spirituality, so the mantra is not very effective. The mantra itself is effective but only if it comes from a real true Guru. Then its real power comes. Some father gave a mantra to my father, so I will get a mantra from his son. It is not that effective. You get the mantra, you do japam, but it all becomes mechanical. The guru does mechanical, the disciple also does mechanical!

Nothing much happens with the Kula Guru system. But when one finds a true Guru, a perfect person, it has tremendous effect. As Swami Nirmalatmanandaji said, when there is a true Guru, tremendous power comes with the mantra, when we accept the mantra. Why should there be a Sanyasin Guru or monastic guru for a lay devotee? Because the Sanyasin has practiced throughout his life, and the love of God and the kindness, the detachment grow in his heart and become a part of his life. That helps him transmit that spiritual

power to the disciple. The disciple feels that something has come. It is not just a word, just a mantra, just a name of God, but the spiritual power comes with it.

In a tradition like our organization or the Sankaracharya organization, or any other organization, where there is a Guru Parampara, it is not only the power from the human Guru, but the power from the whole lineage of Gurus that is transmitted from the Guru to the disciple, whether it is a Sanyasi disciple, who has become a Sanyasi, or a lay devotee. Gurus in a monastic order are selfless, they don't want anything from the disciple. As they have renounced all desires, even the desire to go to heaven or enjoy the world, nothing is there.

They are very pure in their heart. That purity comes from the power of the mantra. It is God's name, the holy word, the holy mantra, and is full of the spirituality that his monk has practiced. With that comes the blessing of the whole Guru Parampara, right from the beginning, say from Shiva to Shankara to my Guru. The power of this entire lineage. In our order, we say that the power comes from Sri Ramakrishna to all the Gurus, all the presidents, and then the one who gives the mantra. All the blessings come to us. The monks practice spirituality, so they bring out the spiritual power that is already there in the mantra.

The monastic gurus are really our true well wishers. They have the kindest of hearts. They want only the good of the disciple without any motive. There is a beautiful verse in the Vivekachudamani that says you can feel that in the monastic Guru. Those who have gotten initiation from our great presidents, Swami Athmasthanandaji, Swami Gahanandaji, Swami Ranganathanandaji, or Swami Vireswaranandaji. I got the mantra from Swami Vireswaranandaji. As Swami Nirmalatmananda said, Swami Vireshwaranandaji used to say, "Practice what I have taught, that is the greatest service to the guru." I couldn't understand the full import of that statement at first. I wanted to serve him, I wanted to help him, but how? Now I understand that it is very fulfilling, when we follow the real teachings of our Guru. That is the real service to our Guru! That makes the teacher happy!

They say that when we do not practice what our teacher taught while giving initiation or after, then we in fact become the cause of a little discomfort or difficulty for the teacher. It is said that the teacher has

to take the disciple's sins. So, we should try to become free from all impurities by practicing the teachings of our Guru, because they are just for our good.

Swami Prabhavananda once told a person who had gotten initiation from President Maharaj at Belur Math, "Now, nothing bad will happen to you." It may seem bad, you may feel for the time being that it is bad, but nothing bad will ever happen to you. That is the power of the monastic Guru for both the monastic, as well as, the nonmonastic.

In our order especially, when we take Sanyas, we have a Sanyasa.Guru. My Sanyasa Guru was Swami Gambhiranandaji Maharaj, and my Diksha Guru was Swami Vireswaranandaji Maharaj. So, one Guru gives Diksha and one gives Sanyas. In other orders, there is no Diksha Guru, but there is a Sanyasa Guru. There is one Guru, the Sanyasin who gives Sanyasa is their Guru. In the passports for monastics, nowadays, you can write the Sanyasa Guru as your parent's name. In our order, the Holy Mother said that the one who gives you initiation even before you took Sanyas is the real Guru. That is why in our order, whether it is a monastic or a lay member, the Guru is the one who gives you the mantra at the time of initiation when you start. That type of Guru we have, as the Vivekachudamani says, *shanta mahanto nivashanti shanto vasanti lokahitam*.

How are our monastic Gurus? They are the good souls, calm and magnanimous. They are serene and very large hearted. They do good to others as the spring. Spring does good without even knowing it is being good. When spring comes good happens, when such a teacher is there, good happens in the world without them trying to do good. That is the spring doing good. Those who have crossed this dreadful ocean of birth and death, help others cross without any motive. Without any motive, they just do good to the disciple, give all their spiritual blessings to the disciple. If the disciple practices a little, he or she will evolve in spiritual life, progress in spiritual life, it is certain to happen. So, that is the power of the Sanyasi Guru, the monastic Guru. They have the power to transform life. All are not Avatars, who can say, Tomader Chaitanya Ho, "May there be spiritual illumination", as Sri Ramakrishna said. When we practice the teaching and mantra that is from the Guru, whether we are monastic or non monastic, we will attain the highest. God realization is possible for whatever lifestyle we have.

BHAGAVATA (8): *How To Face Death*

Swami Ishatmananda

Now let us go back to that place where King Parikshit, being cursed by Sringi, the son of Rishi Samika, was waiting for death, which was due on the 7th day.

Great saints and sages were gathered, among whom was Suka, the King of Monks.

King Parikshit, the scion of the Pandavas, with great humility asked, "O Teacher of Teachers, please tell me what a person should do when waiting for death. How should one face death? O Great One! Tell me what a person waiting for death should hear about, repeat, do, remember and worship. Also, please tell me what he should not do." (Bh 1.19.37-38)

Suka said, "O King! You have put a very excellent question. It is beneficial to the world." (Bh 2.1.1)

The great sage Suka appreciated the question about the duty of a person who is aware of death. Why? One should know the goal of human life, which is most difficult to get and go beyond the cycle of birth and death.

Though the majority of people deluded by Maya think of the worldly activities as the 'Summum Bonum' of human life. But the descent of the Pandavas is not like that.

After describing the futility of the worldly life in a few verses, the great sage Suka described the path and technique to face death. "Therefore, O Scion of Bharata's line, the All-Pervading Spirit and the Omnipotent Lord of all, Hari, should be heard about, praised and remembered always by those who want to attain the state of fearlessness (2/1/5).

For all spiritual aspirants, whether they follow the method of intellectual self-analysis or the path of action, consisting in the discharge of duties without attachment—the goal of human life is to realize God. (2.1.6)

Repetition of the holy name of God is the best

way for all. "All renouncing monks, yogins, and those who desire to go to heaven—only the holy name of God can give them success (2/1/11).

When death approaches, one should not be afraid, but rather with a calm mind, let go of all attachments related to the body and mind (2/1/15).

"O King, repeated practice of concentration will remove all weaknesses of the mind" (2/1/20).

Try again and again to concentrate your mind on the Divine Form of God. That will generate devotion in the mind.

Cosmic Form of the Formless

The Bhagavata has discussed how to face death and concluded that you should concentrate your mind on the Divine Form of God, the Supreme Being.

But the Bhagavata has said again and again that the Supreme Being is formless—without form. Then how could the formless have a cosmic form?

In order to clarify this, King Parikshit asked Suka nearly 20 questions about creation.

To answer King Parikshit's questions, Suka said, "O King, in the Bhagavata Purana there is a discussion of 10 subjects." (Book 2, Chapter 10)

1. Sarga: Creation in general by God
2. Visarga: Creation in particular by Brahma
3. Sthana: Activities of the Lord for the maintenance of the world.
4. Poshana: Preservation
5. Manvantara: Pious mode of living
6. Uti: Karmic tendencies in latent and active forms
7. Ishanukatha: Description of the Lord's Incarnations
8. Nirodha: Dissolution of the jivas, retaining their tendencies, in the Lord.
9. Mukti: Liberation from all desires
10. Asraya: The source of creation & dissolution

of the jivas and the universe, which is known as Brahman or Paramatman.

Then Suka said, "The One desiring to be many, rose from His seat of yogic slumber. He then divided His luminous seed into three by His will." (2.10.13)

These three divisions are:

Adhidaiva	The Celestial
Adhyatma	The Human
Adhibhauta	The Material

"Listen to me, O King, what happened next."

"By the exertion of the Great Purusha, from the space in the heart of the Cosmic Being arose Vitality (ojah), Mental Power (Sahah), and Physical Power (Bala). From these subtle sources of energies originated the Principal Consciousness (Prana), which is also known as Sutratma, the thread of all vital energies—the collective self, running through all. When the collective self works, the active tendency in all beings is aroused. When it is inactive, all beings also become inactive." (2.10.14)

In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna said, "I have no duty anywhere; I have nothing to gain and there is nothing that I cannot gain; still I am always engaged in work." (3.22)

Why? Because he is the Self, holding all the individual selves.

In another place Sri Krishna mentioned that He is the connecting source of all beings like a thread running through all the flowers and making the different flowers into a garland.

Now, a very important question! If God is acting as the Self in all beings, then when an individual dies, the others should be affected, just as when the thread holding the garland gets snapped in one place, the whole garland is affected.

In different verses of the 10th chapter of the 2nd book of the Bhagavata, particularly verses 16 through 33, the different parts and senses of the Cosmic Being are described.

"Desiring to do many works, the Cosmic Person developed arms—the faculty of strength. When He desired to move, legs developed." (2.10.23)

After describing the gross form of the Cosmic

Being, Sri Suka said that there was another form, which was different from the gross form of the Lord—the cause of the gross form, which is unmanifested to the senses, beyond the powers of speech and mind, without origin, without existence and cessation, eternal, indescribable and incomprehensible." (2.10.34)

Now, the reply to the question of why when an individual dies, the others are not disturbed. In the 34th verse, Suka gave the answer, "Both of these forms of the Cosmic Being are the projections of His power (Maya). The wise therefore do not accept them as final, but go beyond them."

Parikshit's Questions

In our last discussion, we have heard how the Formless takes form. In reality, as the great sage Suka mentioned, this form of God is nothing but the projection of Maya.

In the 8th chapter of the second book, King Parikshit, like a true spiritual seeker, asked a few questions to Suka Deva—a profound teacher.

The answers by Suka Deva give a different dimension to the Bhagavata and separate it from other Vedantic scriptures. The Bhagavata is an excellent blend of knowledge and devotion—formless and with form. The Bhagavata is a Hindu theology, explaining about God and also Hindu religious beliefs. King Parikshit's questions and Suka Deva's answers develop the mythology, theology and philosophy of Hinduism.

Parikshit's questions are very pertinent and interesting.

1. The Atman is spirit, non-material. How does it then come to have a body that is material? Is there any cause or is it accidental? (2.8.7).

2. A person is having many organs and limbs. The Supreme Being from whom this person and the whole world is created also has the same limbs. What is the difference between God and person?

3. Brahma, the First Born, has seen the divine form of the Supreme God. What is that Divine Form of God like?

4. The Supreme Being is the Lord of Maya and the indweller within all beings, as well as the source from which creation, sustenance, and dissolution of the universe takes place. In what form does He remain when He dissociates Himself from His own Maya?

5. We have heard that the worlds and their protectors are formed from His limbs, and, again, that the worlds and their protectors are His limbs. Why is there this contradiction?

6a. What is the difference in length of time between a Kalpa (Full Cycle) and a Vikalpa (Intermediary cycle)?

6b. How can we understand the division of time as past, present and future?

6c. What is the difference in life span of humans, pitris and devas?

Before we proceed with the other questions of King Parikshit, let us hear what Suka said in reply to the first question of King Parikshit. (Bhagavata 2.9.1)

How can the Self, which is conscious, be attached to an inert body? Through the power of the Lord's Maya! The connection is like the connection of the dream body with the self of the dreaming person.

To continue with the questions—

7a. O Sage! please tell me about the action of Time in its micro and macro aspects.

7b. What realms can man attain through his karma (actions)?

8. People want to become Devas (celestial beings with supernatural power over the phenomena). Please tell me what type of karma will lead one to that type of birth. (2.8.14)

In the 2nd book, 8th chapter, verses 7-23, King Parikshit went on asking questions.

9. He asked about the origin of worlds like Bhu (earth) Patala (Nether world), sky, planets, mountains, rivers, oceans, islands, etc. (2.8.15)

10. He wanted to know about the universe, the lives of the Great Men and the Varnashrama ideal (Caste System). (2.8.16)

11. About divine incarnations, yugas, and duties pertaining to a particular yuga. (2.8.17)

12. Duties of people—common and special duties. (2.8.18)

12b. He wanted to know about yoga, how to practice, etc., and also how the yogis destroy the subtle body (Linga Sarira). (2.8.19)

13. He wanted to know about the importance of scriptures—Vedas, Vedangas (Subsidiary Vedas), Dharma Shastras, Itihasas (traditional history), and also the Puranas. (2.8.20)

14. King Parikshit wanted to know about creation, protection, dissolution and the three ends of human life—religion (Dharma), wealth (Artha) and desire (Kama). (2.8.21)

15. He asked a very interesting question about how the individual soul (Jiva), lying latent in the power of the Lord, emerges, and the Liberation of the Atman. (2.8.22)

16. How the omnipotent Bhagavan limits Himself through Maya for His creation and how in dissolution He gives up that power, Maya, and remains as the Pure Witness.

The word "Maya" means a power, which no one can define but, nevertheless, can feel its existence was first mentioned in the Rig Veda.

In the Philosophical era we see that the great exponent of Vedanta, Shankaracharya, utilized this "Maya" concept to explain the creation.

The Bhagavata also explains how Consciousness gets mixed up with inert things like the body through Maya.



Introduction to the Cover Page: Liberation through Friendship

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*tvameva mātā ca pitā tvameva
tvameva bandhuśca sakhā tvameva
tvameva vidyā draviṇam tvameva
tvameva sarvam mama deva deva.*

You truly are my Mother and You truly are my Father; You truly are my companion You truly are my friend; You truly are my Knowledge and You truly are my Wealth; You truly are my all, my God of Gods. [A prayer from Pandava Gita]

The words *bandhu* and *sakhā* both mean “friend”. The difference is *bandhu* is related to *bandhan* meaning bondage or tie or attachment and *sakhā* contains two words. *Sa* is derived from *sama* or equal and one of the meanings of *kha* is senses. Best of all senses or organs is *prana* or life force. So the one with whom sameness of life-force is felt is called *sakhā*. A friend is *bandhu* and *sakhā* with whom the strongest tie of our life is shared.

The goal of spiritual life is to go beyond all changeable bondages – that is moksha. There are many ways to attain that goal. According to Hinduism, followers of the path of devotion worship God with different emotions. Five types of moods are traditionally practiced towards God: peaceful, servant, friend, childlike affection, and beloved. These attitudes are not independent, but rather complementary. There are excellent examples of spiritual practitioners who attained the highest goal in each path.

Sri Ramakrishna applied all these spiritual emotions to attain the goal of human life – God realization. We all know the stories related to Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual journey more or less . In this cover story we shall revisit his attitude of friendship in the light of Swami Vivekananda.

Naren and Rakhal, later Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda respectively, were the

two foremost monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna in order of coming to Sri Ramakrishna and from the perspective of their contributions to the history of the Ramakrishna Movement. Naren and Rakhal were friends before coming to Sri Ramakrishna. Ram Chandra Dutta, a medical practitioner and chemist, introduced Naren to Sri Ramakrishna. Rakhal first came to Sri Ramakrishna through his relative, Manomohan Mitra. It is interesting to note that the first two householder devotees to come to Dakshineswar were Ram Dutta and Manomohan Mitra.

Anyway, before meeting Naren, Sri Ramakrishna had seen him in a mystic vision. In his own words, “*One day I found that my mind was soaring high in samādhi along a luminous path. It soon transcended the stellar universe and entered the subtler region of ideas. As it ascended higher and higher I found on both sides of the way ideal forms of gods and goddesses. The mind then reached the outer limits of that region, where a luminous barrier separated the sphere of relative existence from that of the Absolute. Crossing that barrier, the mind entered the transcendental realm where no corporeal being was visible. Even the gods dared not peep into that sublime realm, but had to be content to keep their seats far below. The next moment I found seven venerable sages seated there in samādhi. It occurred to me that these sages must have surpassed not only men, but even the gods, in knowledge and holiness, in renunciation and love. Lost in admiration, I was reflecting on their greatness, when I saw a portion of that undifferentiated luminous region condense into the form of a divine child. The child came to one of the sages, tenderly clasped his neck with his lovely little arms, and, addressing him in a sweet voice, attempted to drag his mind down from the state of samādhi. The magic touch roused the sage from his super-conscious state, and he fixed his unmoving,*

half open gaze upon that wonderful child. His beaming countenance showed that the child must have been the treasure of his heart. In great joy the strange child said to him, "I am going down. You too must go with me." The sage remained mute, but his tender look expressed his assent. As he kept gazing on the child, he was again immersed in samādhi. I was surprised to find that a fragment of the sage's body and mind was descending to earth in the form of an effulgent light. No sooner had I seen Naren than I recognized him to be that sage." When asked, Ramakrishna said that the divine child was himself.

In college, Narendra read the Western philosophers of the nineteenth century, and from family he learned about faith in God, and yet overall his concept of religion was unsettled. He was looking for someone who would still the turmoil of his soul. Attracted by the magnetic personality of Keshab, the leader of Brahma Society, he joined the Brahmos and became a singer in its choir. But in that society he did not find anyone who had seen God. He continued to be in a state of mental commotion. At the age of eighteen Naren came to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar; he was accompanied by some light-hearted friends and sang a couple of songs at Sri Ramakrishna's request. A few minutes later Sri Ramakrishna led him to the screened verandah north of his room. They were alone. In a most tender voice, **as if he were a friend of long acquaintance**, the Master said: "Ah! You have come very late. Why have you been so unkind as to make me wait all these days? My ears are tired of hearing the futile words of worldly men. Oh, how I have longed to pour my spirit into the heart of someone fitted to receive my message!" He talked thus, sobbing all the time. Then he addressed Narendra as Narayana, born on earth to remove the misery of humanity. A verse from Srimad Bhagavatam

tasmāt bhavantam anavadyam anantapāraṁ...

nārāyaṇaṁ narasakhaṁ śaraṇaṁ prapadye.

Thee who art unimpeachable, infinite and eternal, omniscient, the Lord of the Universe, who art the Supreme Being Narayana, and the Friend of Man.

From the very beginning Sri Ramakrishna saw

Narayana, the friend of humanity, in his friend, Naren.

Later he told his dear Naren, "I love you because I see God in you, and the day I no longer see God in you I shall not be able to bear even the sight of you."

Naren's circle of spiritual friends contained Bhavanath Chatterji, who was instrumental in collecting Sri Ramakrishna's shrine photo. The very sight of guileless Bhavanath often awakened Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual emotion. He was greatly attached to Naren, and the Master encouraged their friendship.

Gangadhar was already leading a strict brahmachari life, when he met the Master in 1884. The Master praised his ascetic habit and Gangadhar became a close companion of Naren.

Pratap Hazra used to sit in the verandah of Sri Ramakrishna's room and loved to talk about high theories of spirituality though he was reluctant to practice them himself. Naren was his friend and used to enjoy conversing with him. Even though Sri Ramakrishna did not approve some of Hazra's behaviors, but Naren supported him, as Sri Ramakrishna would say, because they were "ferend". Sri Ramakrishna learned only a handful of English words and "friend" was one of those.

Sri Ramakrishna, love incarnate, said, "Once, in a spiritual mood, I felt intense love for Jagannath, love such as a woman feels for her sweetheart. In that mood I was about to embrace Him; when I broke my arm. It was then revealed to me: 'You have assumed this human body. Therefore establish with human beings the relationship of friend, father, mother, or son.' In this list friend came first and undoubtedly, his best friend was Naren as he, in Sri Ramakrishna's words, "belongs to a very high plane-the realm of the Absolute. He has a manly nature. So many devotees come here, but there is not one like him." Naren was like a thousand-petalled lotus. Sri Ramakrishna clearly says, "I feel great strength when Narendra is with me in a gathering."

From a secular perspective, Chanakya, a great diplomat of ancient India, defined a friend as one who will not abandon in festivity or happiness, or

in misery or in famine, or in a cemetery or in a king's court or at the time of insurrection. According to the Bhagavad Gita (6.5) only the Self can be a friend of Self. Beginning with Socrates, Western philosophers have put serious thought into defining "friend". Aristotle categorized friendship in three types: lowest (temporary) or friendship of pleasure, middle and highest.

Philosophy of friendship is apparently confusing. In the course of life two people may come together, float in the ocean of life side by side for some time and get separated again. The temporary bonding between them may be due to utility or virtue. The second one covers holy company also. All of these are kind of hedonistic ideas. There is a paradoxical saying, "*My dear friend, there is no friend.*" This is not a mere scholarly saying. In a real friendship, there is no question of having control over a friend's life. However, it is ordinarily thought that one, who is there when you need then, is a friend indeed. But, the first condition of friendship is that one cannot "use" a friend. Also, a friend cannot be a useless one. It sounds confusing as in true sense a friend is a second self. Since grammatically "self" is always first person singular, there cannot be a second person who can be called a first person. There is one and only one. These confusions should get cleared up by seeing the spiritual practice of friendship mood by Sri Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

Let's go back to the meetings between Sri Ramakrishna and Naren. Right after meeting in the veranda Naren asked his long-standing question, "*Sir, have you seen God?*" and heard the Master saying, "*Yes, I have seen God. I have seen Him more tangibly than I see you. I have talked to Him more intimately than I am talking to you.*" Naren was amazed. It is important to note that the Master did not say "*I can show you*", though he could do so. He gave freedom to Naren to figure it out, staying by him as a friend. In the very next sentence he emphasized that sincerity is the key.

During his second visit, by the touch of Sri Ramakrishna, Naren saw his own ego and the

whole universe almost swallowed in a nameless void. Again, at the Master's touch, during his third visit, Naren lost his outer consciousness entirely and, being questioned by Sri Ramakrishna, he told of his spiritual antecedents and whereabouts, his mission in this world, and the duration of his mortal life. Sri Ramakrishna understood that Naren was the perfected sage, whom he had seen in his mystic vision. The Master also realized that the day Naren would learn his of his real nature, he would give up his body in yoga.

Naren never stayed at Dakshineswar like Latu or Baburam but was a regular visitor and for some time had been going to Dakshineswar daily to spend time in the panchavati in meditation and contemplation. Naren bore love for the Master in the secret chamber of his heart. Sri Ramakrishna loved that he doubted the Master's realizations instead of accepting everything without any questions. He could hardly bear Naren's absences and often would weep bitterly for the sight of him.

The Master started to teach Naren the non-dualistic Vedanta philosophy. At the beginning of 1884 Naren's father suddenly died of heart attack, leaving the family in a state of utmost poverty with lots of debt. Relatives turned their faces around, some even bringing suit to deprive Naren of his ancestral home. He searched for a job but without success. There was no friend with unselfish sympathy. Naren began to doubt the very existence of God. His friends thought he had become an atheist and circulated gossip maligning his moral character. Sri Ramakrishna heard these false reports and told a disciple who complained about Naren, "*Hush, you fool! The Mother has told me it can never be so. I won't look at you if you speak that way again.*" This faith, that is called friendship.

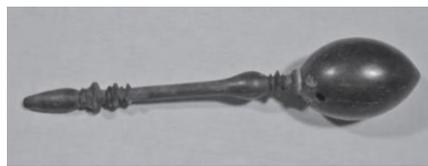
Marriage is considered as a deeper friendship between souls and Naren received marriage proposals from two rich women, but both of them wanted to keep him under their control and conditions. He refused with contempt. Rather he requested Sri Ramakrishna to pray to the Divine Mother to remove his poverty. The Master, again, refused to interfere and bade him pray to

Her directly. Naren was unable to ask for petty worldly things from the Mother of the universe. Instead he prayed for Knowledge and renunciation, love and liberation. But he could request his friend Sri Ramakrishna to remove his poverty, and the Master assured that his family would not lack simple food and clothing.

One day soon after Naren accepted the power of the Divine Mother, Sri Ramakrishna sitting almost on Naren's lap, said to a devotee, pointing first to himself, then to Narendra: *"I see I am this, and again that. Really I feel no difference. A stick floating in the Ganges seems to divide the water; but in reality the water is one. Do you see my point? Well, whatever is, is the Mother - isn't that so?"* In later years Swami Vivekananda wrote: *"Sri Ramakrishna was the only person who, from the time he met me, believed in me uniformly throughout. Even my mother and brothers did not. It was his unwavering trust and love for me that bound me to him for ever. He alone knew how to love. Worldly people only make a show of love for selfish ends."*

Naren was the eternal companion of Sri Ramakrishna. Let's read an incident from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. *"Narendra came and sat beside the Master ... the Master entered into ecstasy as soon as he saw him and touching Narendra's body with his, sat almost on his lap, saying, 'What I see is that this (his body) I am and this (Narendra's body) too, I am. Truly, I say, I see no difference. Just as the water of the Ganga seems to be divided in two parts, when a stick is placed on it, but actually there are no divisions ; one whole mass of water exists ; so it is here. Do you understand it ? What exists but Mother? What do you say ? ' Speaking thus he suddenly said, 'I'll smoke.' A devotee prepared a smoke for him and gave him the hookah. Smoking a puff or two, he returned the Hookah and saying, 'I will smoke with the bowl', took it in his hands and began smoking. Smoking three or four puffs, he held it near Narendra's mouth and said, 'Just have a puff, a puff through my hands.' Narendra shrank, at which the Master said, 'What ignorance! Are you and I different? This- am I, that also am I.' Saying so, he held both his hands again in front of Narendra's*

mouth with a view to make him smoke. Thus compelled,. Narendra smoked two or three puffs with his mouth through the Master's hands and then stopped.



Hubble-bubble made of coconut shell and wooden stick, used by Sri Ramakrishna

Seeing him stop smoking, the Master himself was again going to smoke. Narendra said hurriedly, 'Sir, wash your hands and then smoke,' But the Master paid no heed to the words. He said, 'You wretch, you are awfully conscious of differences', and smoked with his hands that had been touched by Narendra's lips and spoke many things in that ecstatic mood. This type of bonding, beyond any sense of distinctions of I and you, leads to liberation. This love and faithfulness in friendship brings moksha – as it is the essence of concentration or dhyana, the point of fulfillment of devotion or bhakti and the attaining of Consciousness through the dawn of Knowledge.

Whenever Naren decided to spend the night at the temple garden, the Master would become highly pleased as, he would say, *at the sight of Narendra my mind loses itself in the consciousness of the Absolute.* His mind used to get dissolved in both Knowledge and devotion Absolute. The Gospel writer depicts an incident: One day the Master gently stroked Naren's body and affectionately touched his chin, uttering sweetly the holy words, *"Hari Om! Hari Om! Hari Om!"* He was fast becoming unconscious of the outer world. His hand was on Naren's foot. Still in that mood he gently stroked Naren's body. Slowly a change came over his mind. He requested Naren to sing a song because that would make him *"all right"*. He was sitting as still like a speechless motionless statue. Then he became intoxicated with divine love and said: *"O Radha, watch your step! Otherwise you may fall into the Jamuna. Ah!"* Sri Ramakrishna was in the mood of Radha, the embodiment of love absolute!

Radha, though she represents the spiritual mood of a lover to beloved, yet she and other gopis

were Krishna's "sakhī (friend)" also.

Naren had to go through tests and proved he was Sri Ramakrishna's very own. In the Master's own words, *"Those who are my own will come here even if I scold them. Look at Narendra's nature! At first he used to abuse my Mother Kali very much. One day I said to him sharply, 'Rascal! Don't come here any more.' He slowly left the room and prepared a smoke. He who is one's own will not be angry even if scolded. What do you say?"* ... Usually the Master liked Naren's music but one day he frankly said, *"I listened to your singing, but I didn't enjoy it. So I left the room. Your mind is now set on seeking a job, and therefore your song sounded dull."* Once Sri Ramakrishna did not look at Naren for a long period of time. But Naren continued seeing the Master as usual. When the Master asking him why he continued coming, Naren replied that it was because he loved him.

Often when the Master completely forgot the outer world he would not notice anyone in the room, not even his beloved Naren seated by his side. He did not know where he himself was seated. He was totally merged in God.

Naren had freedom to doubt the Master until the very end. Sri Ramakrishna, as a real friend, never gave up on him for this reason. At the time of Sri Ramakrishna's final illness it was Naren alone who thought, *"If in the midst of this racking physical pain he (Sri Ramakrishna) declares his Godhead, then only shall I accept him as an Incarnation of God."* He was alone by the bedside of the Master. It was a passing thought, but the Master smiled and distinctly said, *"He who was Rama and Krishna is now, in this body, Ramakrishna - but not in your Vedantic sense."* Many years later this very Naren described Sri Ramakrishna as: *Samsāya rākshasa nāśa-mahāstram* -- "who is the great weapon to destroy the demon of doubt".

Naren received a good opportunities to meet devotees and monks of various spiritual traditions as they used come and stay at Panchavati, Dakshineswar. But Sri Ramakrishna carefully nurtured Naren's natural tendency – love – his

path for God realization.

One morning Naren came to the Master and the other devotees. They found Sri Ramakrishna was standing on the northeast verandah, close to his own room with a sweet smile on his lips. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna says, *"He wanted to see all his devotees sitting together on the mat. As they sat there the Master looked at them with evident delight and began to talk with them. At Narendra's question on spiritual discipline Sri Ramakrishna said, " Bhakti, love of God, is the essence of all spiritual discipline. Through love one acquires renunciation and discrimination naturally."* By introducing Naren to Gopal's Ma, the Master aroused Naren's heart, which was full of love and tenderness, to the realm of devotion.

One day Sri Ramakrishna was saying, *"... the theory of maya is dry"* and asked Naren, *"Repeat what I said."* Naren followed his instruction and Sri Ramakrishna affectionately stroked Naren's face and hands and said: *"Your face and hands show that you are a bhakta. But the Jnani has different features; they are dry."* Their friendship was soaked in the syrup of love.

Sri Ramakrishna cautioned Naren not only about the dry path of Knowledge, but also about the negative side of Tantrik practices. One day when all were sitting on the verandah and chitchatting, Bhavanath suddenly appeared in the garb of a brahmachari, his face was beaming with joy. Sri Ramakrishna appreciated with a smile and said *"That is his inner feeling. Therefore he has dressed himself as a brahmachari."* But the moment Naren said, *"He has put on the garb of a brahmachari; let me put on the garb of a Tantrik worshipper"* Sri Ramakrishna did not encourage the conversation, rather he condemned their immoral practices. He said that *they could not follow the right course of spiritual discipline but rather enjoyed sense pleasures in the name of religion. ...You need not listen to these things. The bhairavas and the bhairavis of the Tantrik sect also follow this kind of discipline. ... Let me tell you this. I regard woman as my mother; I regard myself as her son. This is a very pure attitude. There is no danger in it. To look on woman as a sister is also not bad."*

Years later we see Naren is lovingly addressing strangers of a foreign country as his "Sisters and brothers". Sri Ramakrishna is the embodiment of all religious traditions. Standing on the platform of the Parliament of World's Religions at Chicago he could see his Master's manifestation. His loving expression to address the audience came out spontaneously.

Naren was meditating on Kali for three or four days, but nothing was happening. Sri Ramakrishna encouraged him by saying, "All in good time, my child. Kali is none other than Brahman. That which is called Brahman is really Kali. She is the Primal Energy." On another occasion he cleared up Naren's way of looking at the world: "You say you understand people; that is why I am telling you all this. ... I know that just as God takes the form of holy men, so He also takes the form of cheats and rogues." The Master laid the foundation stone of practical Vedanta in Naren's heart.

The illness of Sri Ramakrishna's throat was diagnosed as cancer and the Master was moved to Calcutta for better treatment. At Calcutta Naren organized the young disciples attend to the Master day and night. During these days under the watchful eyes of the Master and the leadership of Naren the seed of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, where they would devote themselves to the realization of God and the service of humanity, was sowed. Naren received instructions regarding the propagation of his message after Sri Ramakrishna's passing.

While Sri Ramakrishna's treatment was going on at Cossipore, Naren was serving his Guru and was preparing for his upcoming law exam. One day Sri Ramakrishna smilingly asked Naren, "Won't you continue your studies?" In reply Naren said, "I shall feel greatly relieved if I find a medicine that will make me forget all I have studied." Later on the same day he shared a unique experience with M, "As I tried to read I was seized with a great fear, as if studying were a terrible thing. My heart struggled within me. I burst into tears: I never wept so bitterly in my life. I left my books and ran away. I ran along the

streets. My shoes slipped from my feet - I didn't know where. I ran past a haystack and got hay all over me. I kept on running along the road to Cossipore."

The Cossipore period raised the Master-Naren friendship mood to a different level. One day when Naren was alone with the Master, Sri Ramakrishna looked at him and went into samādhi. Narendra felt the penetration of a subtle force and lost all outer consciousness. Regaining presently the normal mood, he found Sri Ramakrishna telling him: "Today I have given you my all and I am now only a poor fakir, possessing nothing. By this power you will do immense good in the world, and not until it is accomplished will you return." They became sakhā, one soul.

But it took time for Naren to feel that love. He was carrying a fire of intense renunciation burning within him. His soul was restless for the vision of God. His state of mind, Sri Ramakrishna would describe, was to pant and pine for God. His heart was like the rosy color on the eastern horizon that showed that the sun will soon rise. He begged for samādhi but the Master told him, "You will experience a state even higher than samādhi." Naren attained his long-yearned-for, all-effacing experience of nirvikalpa samādhi and his embodied soul realized its unity with the Absolute.

The Master took every care so that Naren could realize *Consciousness is Thine alone*. Again and again he advised him "Dive deep in the sweetness of God's Bliss. What need have we of His infinite creation and unlimited glory?" He did not want to see Naren as one of the *modern Brahmajnanis* who did not taste the sweet bliss. Their eyes look dry and so do their faces. He knew they wouldn't achieve anything without ecstatic love of God.

Just about five months before leaving the mortal frame on March 14, 1886 Sri Ramakrishna smilingly asked Naren, "Well, what do you think of me?" Interestingly, Naren did not describe him, at least at that time, as God but said, "You are a hero, a handmaid of God, and everything else." These words filled Sri Ramakrishna with divine emotion.

Later during a conversation with Dr. Sarkar

Naren explained, "We think of him [meaning the Master] as a person who is like God. Do you know, sir, what it is like? There is a point between the vegetable creation and the animal creation where it is very difficult to determine whether a particular thing is a vegetable or an animal. Likewise, there is a stage between the man-world and the God-world where it is extremely hard to say whether a person is a man or God. ... I don't say that he is God. What I am saying is that he is a godlike man."

Naren confirmed Vijay Krishna Goswami's experience that even at a far distance he could feel the presence of the Master. In the core of his heart Naren could feel Sri Ramakrishna's deep unconditional love of friendship. An excerpt from "The Life of Swami Vivekananda", "One night he dreamt that Sri Ramakrishna came to him and said, "Come! I will show you Gopi Radha". Naren followed him. After having gone some distance, the Master turned to him and said: "Where else will you go?" Saying this, Sri Ramakrishna transformed himself into the beautiful personality and exquisite form of Radha herself.

Love knows no jealousy. Naren used to bring his friends from the Brahma Samaj often. Sri Ramakrishna would provide spiritual advice to them as well. One day when Naren and his Brahma friends were meditating in the Panchavati the Master said to the Brahma devotees: "In meditation one must be absorbed in God. By merely floating on the surface of the water, can you reach the gems lying at the bottom of the sea?"

Friends share equal positions. During the Dakshineswar days, at lunch time the Master would ask Bhavanath, Baburam, M., and the other devotees to go to the guest-house to partake of the sacred offerings, but to Naren he would say: "Won't you take your meal in my room? All right. Narendra and I will eat here."

Other than Krishna and Arjuna there are not many prominent examples in the world of spiritual practices that express devotional friendship. On 24th April 1885, Girish invited Sri Ramakrishna along with the devotees. The meal

was served. Sri Ramakrishna hardly finished half his meal, when he came to Naren with some watermelon sherbet and curd from his own plate to offer him.

Years later at the Belur Math shrine when Swamiji would do the worship of Sri Ramakrishna, there was no special mantra or ritual for the food offering. He would just put all food items before the Master's image and say, "Have food, my friend!"

Naren belonged to the class of the ever-free. This type of people are never entangled in the world. They come to the world only to teach others. The Master knew one day Naren would preach Vedanta in English-speaking countries, but he would not be there physically to see all those days of glories to come. He asked Naren and M., "I should like to hear you speak and argue in English." They both laughed as M was not interested in arguments anymore, but they continued to talk in their mother tongue.

One day at Dakshineswar, M heard the following conversation between the Master and Naren. Sri Ramakrishna was telling Naren, "Look here. Come a little more often. You are a new-comer. On first acquaintance people visit each other quite often, as is the case with a lover and his sweetheart. (Narendra and M. laugh.) So please come, won't you?" Naren was very particular about his promises and said with a smile, "Yes, sir, I shall try."

Naren and the Master went to enjoy the theater a few times – as friends would go. According to Naren, "The whole world is a theatre." The Master agreed adding, "Yes, yes, that's right. In some places you see the play of vidya and in some, the play of avidya."

Once they went to Keshab's house to see a performance of the play entitled *Nava-Vrindavan*. Narendra had taken part in the performance, in which Keshab had played the role of Pavhari Baba. It is interesting to note that as Naren had respect for Keshab, a Brahma spiritual leader, so he had for Pavhari Baba. After Sri Ramakrishna's mahasamadhi, once he wanted to accept

discipleship of Pavhari baba to learn Yoga. But the Master appeared before him with tearful eyes and Naren could not leave Sri Ramakrishna.

Another time they went to the Star Theatre to see a performance of Vrishaketu. After the play Sri Ramakrishna went to the recreation room of the theatre. Girish and Naren were already there. The Master stood near Naren and said, "I have come".

Once Naren was ready to leave as a wandering monk renouncing all and came to see Sri Ramakrishna for his blessing. After a few minutes silence Sri Ramakrishna sang: *We are afraid to speak, and yet we are afraid to keep still; our minds, Radha, half believe that we are about to lose you!* Sri Ramakrishna seemed to be afraid lest Narendra should leave him. The Master with tears in his eyes said, "I know you cannot lead a worldly life," he said, "but for my sake live in the world as long as I live."

Many times we find Narendra was engaged in a heated discussion or arguing with vedantists. Sri Ramakrishna did not like it. He said, "I don't like these discussions. I used to weep and pray to the Divine Mother saying: '... Do Thou tell me, Mother, what is the truth.'" But the Master could see there was a need for argument to convince people also. Therefore, again he said, "All right, go on softly; don't get so excited". Naren, himself, seeing the strong faith of Girish towards Sri Ramakrishna as an Incarnation of God, never contradicted him. He knew the boundary.

The Master wanted to make sure that the

devotees who were visiting him were perceiving Naren correctly. If they appreciated Naren, the Master would conclude, "He must be a good man because he speaks highly of Narendra."

Naren's heart was getting soaked with the sweetness of devotion and the Master noticed how Narendra's whole mind was being drawn toward him. One day Naren said, "It is enough to have faith in God. I don't care about what He is doing or what He hangs from. Infinite is the universe; infinite are the Incarnations." Sri Ramakrishna also noticed, "Narendra now respects Radhika very much. He says that if anyone wants to know how to love Satchidananda, he can learn it from her."

Radha, Radha, Radha – the final expression of Supreme devotion. At Naren's vision when the Master's mind was getting dissolved, he was remembering Radha; when the Master was setting up the foundation of the Order in the hearts of his disciples, keeping Naren as their leader, he prayed to Radha; finally, when he was foreseeing Naren's love spreading in the form of his teachings, he sang the glory of Radha: "Victory to Radha, love personified. Naren will teach loudly inside and outside [India]. Victory to Radha."

Through this love alone, Naren united the whole world as a true friend of humanity, *nara-sakha*. In Sri Ramakrishna's words, Naren "has lighted the fire. Now it doesn't matter whether he stays in the room or goes out."



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