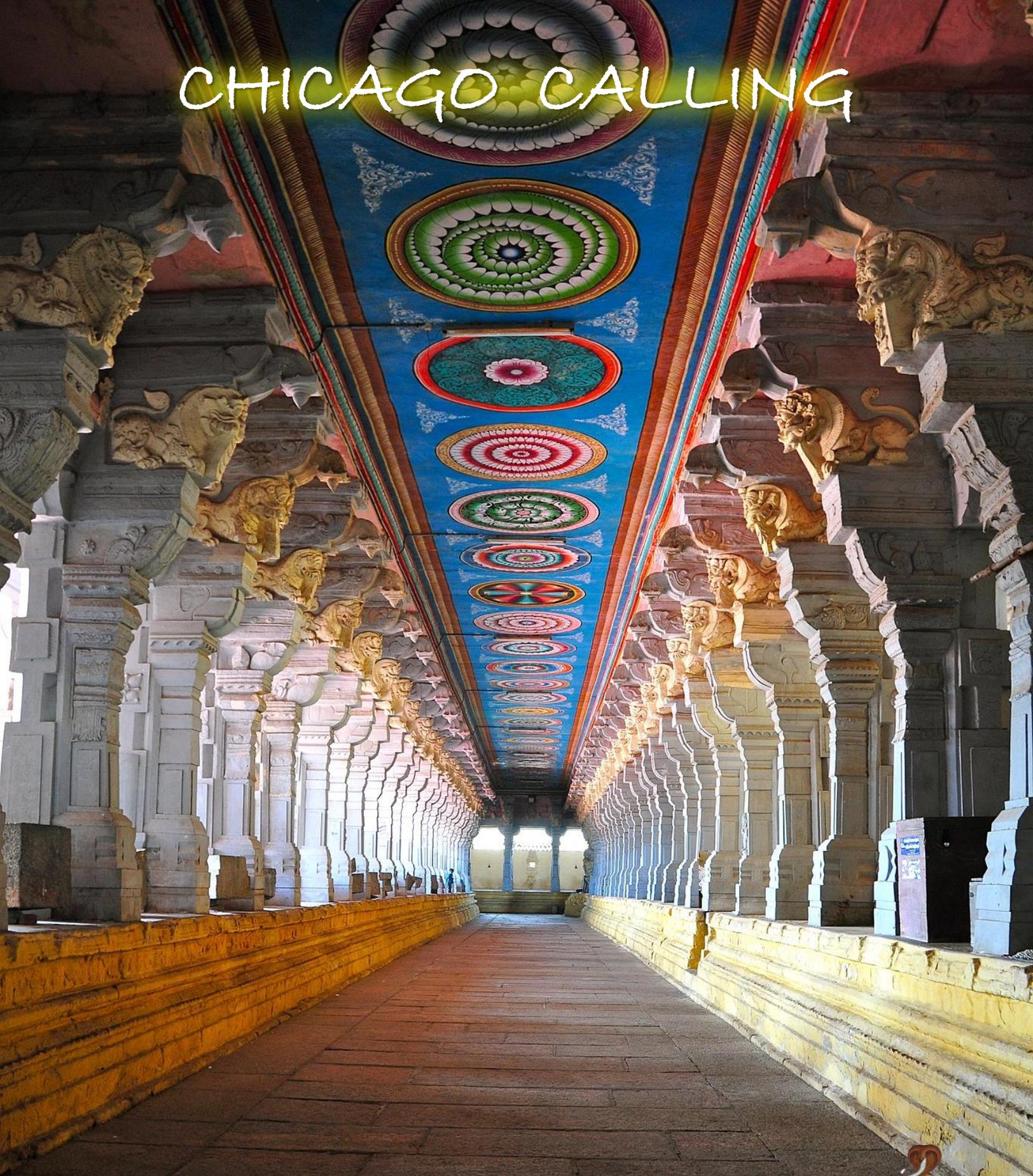


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Sri Ramakrishna: A Unique Story Teller

In our pursuit of God, Sri Ramakrishna offers a refreshing perspective that challenges the notion of spirituality as an arduous endeavor filled with complex rituals and extreme practices. He encourages us to embrace a simpler path, akin to a child's innocent cry for its mother. Sri Ramakrishna suggests that approaching God with such pure devotion is the key. To illustrate this point, he shares a poignant story about a brahmachari and a snake. The brahmachari who, armed with a secret mantra, approached a dangerous snake that others warned him about. Fearlessly, the brahmachari engaged with the snake, asking why it was causing terror among the people. The snake, fearing harm from the crowd, sought advice on what to do. The brahmachari suggested lowering anger and enmity and gave the snake a mantra to repeat. A year later, the brahmachari returned to find the snake seemingly dead. When he inquired, the local boys informed him that the snake had died. Perplexed, the brahmachari called out, and to his surprise, the snake emerged. The boys had played with the now-harmless snake, breaking its bones, thinking it was dead. The snake explained that it had given up anger and become docile, but the boys mistook its harmlessness for death.

The brahmachari reminded the snake that while it had given up biting, there was no instruction against hissing. He emphasized the practicality of the lesson, highlighting the necessity of hissing to create a healthy fear in the world. This story illustrates Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on navigating the world—being strong and protective without causing harm, recognizing the practical nuances of life. For monks, the approach might be different, but for householders, strength and self-protection are essential, a valuable lesson from Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna often conveyed profound truths through engaging stories, and one such



story emphasizes the importance of humility and surrender in the eyes of God. He narrated the tale of a Brahmin who took great pride in creating a beautiful garden, showcasing it to everyone who visited. Each time he boasted, "I did it. I planted these red flowers. I planted those yellow flowers." His ego grew with each accomplishment. One day, a stray cow entered the garden and started eating the flowers. Enraged, the Brahmin beat the cow so severely that it died—an act considered a great sin. As the burden of sin loomed over the Brahmin, he quickly employed his knowledge of scriptures and cleverly shifted the blame to Indra, the king of gods. He claimed that his hands were under the command of Indra, and it was Indra who wielded the stick. The sin, now attributed to Indra, prompted Indra to descend to Earth in the guise of a Brahmana. He praised the garden, asking who the creator was. The Brahmin, unable to resist claiming credit, proudly declared, "I did it, I did it." However, when they reached the spot where the dead cow lay, the Brahmin hesitated. Indra revealed his true form and admonished the Brahmin for attempting to shift blame to God. He emphasized that if one chooses to depend on God, it must be wholehearted and sincere, akin to a kitten trusting its mother.

The story underscores the lesson that true dependence on God requires absolute humility and surrender, without attempting to manipulate or justify one's actions. It encourages individuals to embrace a childlike trust, like the kitten, unconditionally relying on divine guidance and protection. In conclusion, Sri Ramakrishna challenges our skepticism by questioning why we

readily believe in mundane aspects of life but struggle to accept the profound existence of God. He encourages us to reflect on the lives of spiritual giants like himself, Jesus, and Buddha—lives filled with love and compassion. The call is clear: believe, love, and seek God with sincerity.

Sri Ramakrishna, with his profound simplicity, conveyed the significance of faith through a touching story. He shared the tale of a little boy admitted to a school far from home, with a jungle in between. Fearful of crossing the jungle alone, the boy asked his busy, poor mother for help. She, in a tight spot, assured him that his elder brother, Madhusudan Dada, lived in the jungle and would guide him. Trusting his mother's words, the boy began his journey, crying out for Madhusudan Dada. In response to his sincere faith, Lord Krishna appeared, assuring him that he was his elder brother. Together, they crossed the jungle safely. The boy would repeatedly narrate this story to his mother, emphasizing how Madhusudan Dada lovingly cared for him with sweet fruits. In another instance, the boy's teacher needed

something for a Sraddha ceremony. The boy, once again guided by his unwavering faith in Madhusudan Dada, sought something to offer. Madhusudan Dada provided a small amount of kheer, which miraculously multiplied when placed on the plates for the ceremony. The teacher, astounded by the abundance and taste, requested to meet Madhusudan Dada. When the boy called out to Madhusudan Dada, no one appeared. The teacher, skeptical, doubted the existence of Madhusudan Dada. The boy, in distress, pleaded for Madhusudan Dada to come, as the teacher would think he was a liar. A voice responded, stating that the boy's pure and unwavering faith allowed him to experience the divine, but due to the teacher's doubt, a direct appearance was not possible.

Sri Ramakrishna used this story to emphasize that complete faith in the existence of God enables a direct and personal connection. He pointed out that often, lack of faith hinders these experiences, and people are unable to perceive the divine presence.



Disciple: But, sir, it looks rather odd in our eyes that Sannyasins in ochre robe should go about from door to door as the Swami is doing.

Swamiji: Why? The circulation of the magazine is only for the good of the householders. By the spread of new ideas within the country the public at large will be benefited. Do you think this unselfish work is any way inferior to devotional practices? Our object is to do good to humanity. We have no idea of making money from the income of this paper. We have renounced everything and have no wives or children to provide for after our death. If the paper be a success, the whole of its income will be spent in the service of humanity.

Its surplus money will be profitably spent in the opening of monasteries and homes of service in different places and all sorts of work of public utility. We are not certainly working like householders with the plan of filling our own pockets. Know for certain that all our movements are for the good of others.

-- CW 7: Conversations and Dialogues: From the Diary of a Disciple

Next four articles on different aspects of Sri Ma Sarada Devi are prepared based on the talks delivered at Holy Mother's Birth Anniversary celebration on January 7, 2024, at VVSC.



India has a long tradition of 'guru-sishya-parampara' or a 'master-disciple' hierarchy, whereby the disciple is initiated into the spiritual life by the guru. Sri Ma, Sarada Devi, was Sri Ramakrishna's first disciple as well as his wife and companion; at the same time, can we also dare suggest that Ramakrishna too, in a way was her 'bhakta', her follower, because he considered her to be his 'power'?

He himself has been quoted as saying, "She is my power. Without her I cannot lift a finger". He was further heard to say that the Goddesses Kali, Sarasvati and Lakshmi had manifested in the present age as Sri Sarada Devi. On Phalaharini Kali Puja night of 1873, Sri Ramakrishna worshipped Sarada Devi as a living goddess, the Divine Mother, his own ishta devata, Ma Kali. This was the very year that she joined her husband at Daksineshwar and was initiated by him as his 'sishya'. From this point she was elevated from being Sarada, to Sri Ma, the Holy Mother, the Eternal Mother.

This brings a different dimension to the guru-sishya relationship whereby the disciple is also the object of 'bhakti' by the guru. To relate another incident: once, when Sarada Ma was massaging his feet, she asked him about what he thought of her. He explained to her that the same Mother (Bhavatarini/Kali) that was in the Daksineshwar Temple and the same Mother that had given him birth was now sitting before him holding his feet. Sri Sarada Devi, a simple village girl who became the befitting consort of Sri Ramakrishna, was a woman with the innate spiritual strength and

Sri Sarada Devi: A Unique Disciple

Amita Banerji

discipline to be his wife, disciple and later, the guiding spirit behind his vision and mission following his death.

Ma Sarada got married when she was only five years old to Sri Ramakrishna who was 23 at the time. As per the customs of the time, she stayed on in her parental home. At the age of 18 she set off on her own for Daksineshwar to be with her husband. When she reached Daksineshwar, Sri Ramakrishna had already taken sannyasa, the vows of renunciation including celibacy and a life dedicated to spirituality and prayers in search of the godhead. He initiated his wife to a life of spiritual discipline, one from which she never deviated.

It is interesting that she never questioned him about his choice of sannyas; instead when Ramakrishna asked her why she had come there, she replied without hesitation that she had come to help him in his chosen path, which, she well knew, meant an abandonment of any hope of a normal conjugal life for the path to spiritual attainment.

It would not have been easy, and this is where discipline comes in. She later said: "If you practice spiritual discipline for some time in a solitary place, you will find that your mind has become strong, and then you can live in any place or society without being in the least affected by it. When the plant is tender, it should be hedged around. But when it has grown big, not even cows and goats can injure it.

Spiritual practices in a solitary place are essential." To quote two more of her sayings: "Forbearance is a great virtue; there is no other like it", and the second, "The purpose of one's life is fulfilled only when one is able to give joy to

another.” Taken together, these sayings can perhaps give us a glimpse into how she disciplined herself to being the perfect disciple of a great spiritual guru who was also her husband.

We know little about the kind of instructions or teachings imparted to her by Sri Ramakrishna since she has not spoken about them, but we do know that under his guidance she practiced Japa and meditation with great intensity every day in the morning and at night. Through meditation she had reached a degree of spiritual exaltation early in life when she was at Dakshineswar, but she was too modest, too unassuming, to speak of any experiences that would glorify her in the eyes of others, then or later. In fact, she remained a devoted disciple of Sri Ramakrishna whom she considered akin to God – in her words, he was “God eternal and absolute”, and to serve him, she said was to worship God.

Mental purity made her non-judgemental of others. Sarada Ma gave refuge to women whom society had cast aside. Ignoring the restrictions of the orthodox society of those days, she accepted the Western women disciples of Swami Vivekananda who came to Calcutta as her daughters. Although she had grown up in a conservative agrarian society, without any access to modern education, she held progressive views. Hence, she wholeheartedly supported Swami Vivekananda in his plans to rejuvenate India and uplift the masses and women.

She was closely associated with the school for girls started by Sister Nivedita, a foreigner who would not have been accepted into the conservative Indian society of the times, but for Ma Sarada, who welcomed her into her fold saying that her inside was ‘as white’ and pure as her ‘outside’. In a letter to Sarada, Sister Nivedita once wrote: “Surely you are the most wonderful thing of God -- Sri Ramakrishna’s own chalice of His love for the world...” and later called her “one of the strongest and greatest of women”.

Sri Ramakrishna had asked her to continue his

mission after his death and wanted his disciples not to make any distinction between himself and her. Swami Vivekananda held her in high esteem. When he was planning to come to Chicago to participate in the Parliament of Religions, he wrote to Ma Sarada to seek her opinion, and it is only after he received her blessings, he decided to embark on the journey. When the Ramakrishna Mission was started, she played an important role as the advisory head of a nascent organization.

Till the very end, she remained a devoted disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, a singular and amazing relationship. She often spoke of herself as his handmaid and instrument, as one of the many seekers who found refuge at his feet. When a devotee asked her advice she said, “I do not know anything. I repeat only what I have heard from the Master. Read The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna and you will know all you need.” To another who asked her blessing she said, “The Master will bless you.” Moreover, she also stated, “Sri Ramakrishna is the Supreme God and the Supreme Goddess. He is the essence of all mantras and the embodiment of all deities.” She carried Sri Ramakrishna’s picture everywhere and worshiped it daily, seeing in it his living presence. Often she remarked that one should not make a distinction between the physical body and its shadow in a picture. She talked intimately with the Master and fed him in the picture. She was indeed, the ideal ‘sisya’, but one cannot end without citing some of Ramakrishna’s thoughts about his ‘sisya-wife’. Once, seeing Lata Maharaj meditating in the Panchavati, he said to him, “You fool, the deity whom you are contemplating is working herself to death by scouring pots and pans.” She is a unique example of an ideal disciple, sahadharmini or his complementary, as well as a mother who taught by example to Sri Ramakrishna’s countless disciples. Before his death, Sri Ramakrishna told her that she would have to bring light to deluded people groping in darkness thus passing on the mantle of his spiritual leadership to his disciple-wife whom he had initiated into spiritual life.

This was a blessed relationship indeed, where the sishya saw her guru as “the essence of all mantras”, and the guru viewed his sishya as his ‘deity’!

Her last statement also, made to a devotee before her death, eloquently summed up not only her own life of silent loving service, but also how she wanted us to live. “But let me tell you one thing. If you want peace of mind, do not find fault

with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child, the whole world is your own.”

This is a profound statement. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that a white cloth takes the color of the dye in which it is soaked. So, if we soak our mind in the dye of others’ faults, it will become tainted with those very faults that we see in others.



Swami Gambhiranada Maharajji’s book “Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi” as a resource for this talk. While reading that book has been a huge learning experience for me, I am keenly aware that there are many amongst us here who are so familiar with this material that the next 10 minutes or so may sound trivial. My hope is that I will be able to touch on a few of the incidents from Holy Mother’s life that you are fond of, making it interesting. Although I relied heavily on the recommended book “Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi”, I also have snippets from “In the Company of The Holy Mother” by Her Direct Disciples.

Sri Saradamani Devi who otherwise appears as an ordinary person like us is portrayed by Swami Gambhirananda Maharaj ji through the various chapters, as the mother, the guru and the Deity all blended in a “finely integrated and harmonized life”. I would like to spend the next three minutes

Mother counseled her devotees to look inside their own selves. By doing so, they would discover that some of the faults they see in others are in them too. That will make them humble, forgiving, sympathetic and understanding. She also counseled everyone to regularly practice spiritual disciplines like prayers, repetition of God’s name, and meditation. This was the essence of both Sri Ramakrishna’s and Ma Sarada’s lives and teachings for us ordinary mortals.

Thank you, I will end with a verse of the ‘Guru pranam mantra’: “A Guru can awaken us from the darkness of ignorance by applying to us the balm of knowledge or awareness of the Supreme, I salute such a Guru”. 🙏

Ma Sarada as Guru

Devalina Law

highlighting these three aspects.

Amjad, a Muslim robber would always call Sri Saradamani Devi “mother” and she reciprocated with her love and kindness. To Radhu, her niece she has been known to say: “As Sharat is my child so also is Amjad”. Sharat was Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission while Amjad, a criminal. Yes, she was a mother to all.

Guru: Swami Premananda pointed out that the Master “used to pick and choose his disciples. And what do we see in the Mother? She gives shelter to all.” Those who came for initiation were seldom rejected and some pure souls were even given the mantra without asking. She used to say, “Master is sending these (candidates)” or “It’s the Master who graciously blesses them. I am only his instrument”. Swayed sometimes by compassion and at other times by inspiration, Mother would be a guru

imparting mantra and guidance to hundreds of disciples.

Swami Vivekananda had refused initiation to Surendranath Sen by letting him know that he was destined to be initiated by someone "mightier". Disappointed Surendranath Sen went home. Later he had a dream that he was receiving mantra from a woman. A few years later while visiting Jayrambati during Durga Puja he received initiation from Mother. After the initiation Mother asked if the mantra matched the one in his dream. Yes, many who encountered her, and many who have studied her life in-depth recognize her to be a Deity.

But my topic is Mother as Guru. I have always considered the word "guru" to mean a teacher; especially intellectual guide or spiritual guide. A person who removes darkness from the mind by imparting knowledge. But through this study on Holy Mother, I came to learn that a true spiritual guru is a savior. Savior who through love accepts the entire responsibility of the disciple and often removes their sins and bad karma. Mother said that Sri Ramakrishna had cancer because he accepted the sins of Girish. Similarly, we see evidence of mother suffering as she took the responsibility of redeeming her disciple's souls. "About the power of mantra and the taking over of sins", the Holy Mother said to Brahmachari Rashbihari, "Energy is transferred through a mantra- the guru's go to the disciple and the disciple's comes to the guru. That's how sin is accepted through the imparting of mantra and the body gets so many diseases. It's hard task to be a guru; one has to take a share if a sin is committed by a disciple. If the disciple is good, the guru is benefitted." - February 1913

One time Swami Brahmananda had refused initiation of three men because of their sins and apparently told them that they could go to Mother if they wanted. When the three men came to Jayrambati to see the Mother, she sat with her legs folded and refused to initiate them recognizing their bad karma. However, the men cried and

finally when the men had asked Mother the third time, she did initiate them out of pity and compassion. A few days later when Swami Brahmananda was sitting facing the River Ganges with Swami Premanand, Swami Shivananda and Swami Saradananda he heard of the incidence. After a long silence Swami Premananda heaved a sigh and uttered, "We can't express in words the poison that she has accepted. If we had done so, we would have been burnt down to ashes."

Then there were circumstances where the candidate was so suitable that the Mother felt inspired to initiate. Mother was convalescing in Calcutta when a Parsi youth came and implored her for a mantra so that he could realize God. Brahmachari Rashbihari who was with her intervened because of her health. Mother sent him to ask Sarat Maharaj for permission. When the Brahmachari returned with Swami's unquestionable consent he found the Mother had already made all arrangements for initiating the youth.

If the candidate inspired Mother she did not take time, place or circumstance into consideration. Once the Mother was at Vishnupur station waiting for her train to Calcutta when a porter cried out to her, and fell to her feet weeping. After consoling him, Mother gave him the mantra there at that platform.

The book has many such stories of Mother's motivation for being a guru as well as her dedication to redeeming the souls of those who she accepted as her disciple, but in the last few seconds I wanted to switch gear a little. The Mother was very clear on the efficacy of japa and meditation. She insisted for most of her disciples the repetition of mantra one hundred and eight times must be done two times a day, every day without fail. She pointed out that such practice helps calm the restless mind. But she said although "through japa and austerity the bondage of Karma is cut" however, God realization occurs only through devotion and love citing Krishna and the cowherds as example. 🍀



Holy Mother as a Dedicated Wife

Maneka Kaul

'Holy Mother' as we all call her - Sri Sarada Devi was only 5 years old when she got married to Sri Ramakrishna who was 23 years old then. Such marriages were a common thing in Bengal during those times.

It is said that once, when Sarada Devi was 2 years old, she was taken by her relatives to a neighboring village to see a religious festival. Ramakrishna was present there as well. One of the ladies in the group teasingly asked little Sarada, "Who among these boys here, will you marry?" Sarada with her tiny little finger pointed straight to Ramakrishna. At this, the women had a good laugh and exclaimed, 'Oh! you are going to marry that mad boy!' No one at that time knew that, it would come true after all.

Few years later, when Sri Ramakrishna's family was looking for a bride for him, they were frustrated, as no one would agree to give their daughter to him. Ramakrishna at that time, had a reputation of having mental breakdown and behaving weirdly at his job as a priest at Dakshineswar temple. Sri Ramakrishna is said to have come to his family's rescue himself and in one of his ecstatic moods told them, "Why are you looking here and there? Go to Jayarambati and there in Ramachandra Mukherjee's home, you will find a bride that is reserved for me. "

Sri Sarada Devi was destined to be Ramakrishna's spiritual consort. She was the one to carry his message of "Oneness" forward in the world and guide us all in our spiritual upliftment.

After their wedding in 1858, Sri Ramakrishna went back to Dakshineswar and little Sarada went back to her parents home. However, she would come back to Kamarpukur here and there in her husband's absence. In 1867, when she was 14 yrs old, Sarada was at her in-laws in Kamarpukur and

Ramakrishna visited his home. He had finished his Sadhana and was well-established in God consciousness. During that time, remembering his duty towards his wife, he started to instruct her in various worldly and spiritual matters.

Sri Ramakrishna knew that in later years, Sarada Devi would act as spiritual teacher. He taught her about the transient nature of the world. He asked her to cultivate detachment from the impermanent objects and develop devotion to God, who alone is real and eternal. Sri Sarada Devi keenly learned and grasped all that was taught to her. After spending a year in Kamarpukur, Sri Ramakrishna returned back to Dakshineswar .

Few more years later, news of his strange behavior and madness started to come to Kamarpukur again. At that time Sri Sarada Devi decided to go to Dakshineswar, to take care of her husband.

When she reached Dakshineswar, instead of getting annoyed with her presence, Ramakrishna greeted her pleasantly and with respect. Sarada Devi spent about 9 to 10 months at Dakshineswar during that visit, staying mostly in Ramakrishna's room.

One day Ramakrishna asked her, trying to test her, "Have you come here to drive me down to worldly life?" She replied, "Why would I do that? I have come here to help you in realizing your spiritual ideal." Master was moved by her answer and was comfortable in asking her to sleep in the same bed as his. Despite being in close physical contact, both were so immersed in spiritual bliss, that the desire for worldly enjoyment never aroused in them.

Sri Ramakrishna, convinced of her purity, was eager to awaken her spirituality fully. On June 5, 1872 he did that by worshiping her as goddess Shodashi. At the end of his worship, Master put his rosary and prostrated in front of her,

surrendering the fruits of his austerities and himself at her feet. By this, he symbolized offering everything that he had, to the Divine mother manifest in the form of Sarada Devi.

Sri Sarada Devi followed all that her husband taught her and wanted her to be. She proved to be a true Sahadharmani, fellow seeker in higher values of life. She molded herself into the footsteps of her husband and thus they became perfect ideals of both married state and monastic values.

Next 13 years of her life from 1872-1885, when Sarada Devi lived in Dakshineswar, she stayed in a small room, in a building called Nahabat- the music tower. The room was only 50 square feet, with no windows and a small 4 feet x 2 feet door. This is where she kept her belongings and worshiped during the day. This room was so small that people would comment, she is in exile like Sita. The discomfort of small space was of no bother to her. Her day would start every day at 3am. She would take a bath in river Ganga, come back to her room, do her japa and meditation for a few hours before starting her household duties.

She used to enjoy attending to the Master's needs. His stomach was delicate and wouldn't handle temple food well. She would cook for him daily with utmost care, so he doesn't fall sick. She would also clean his room, wash his dishes and clothes etc. She was there to serve her husband, in whom she saw the embodiment of God himself.

During that time Master's mother was also living in Dakshineswar. Sarada Devi attended to her as well with meticulous care. She also took responsibility for feeding all the devotees that came to see the Master. It is said, she made chapatis out of seven pounds wheat flour and countless betel rolls every day.

There were times when she would not see the Master for weeks together, as he would be constantly visited and surrounded by his devotees and he would always be busy giving spiritual talks. She would stand for hours behind a small hole in the screen of her porch, from where she could see him at a distance and listen to his singing. She witnessed him going into spiritual moods from time to time, where he would lose

consciousness of the outside world completely. One such time this happened at night, and he did not come down to the normal plane of consciousness for a long time. This really frightened her. Since she did not know when he would go into Samadhi at night, she used to stay awake all night. She not only proved herself to be a devoted wife but also a true disciple putting everything she learned into practice.

The days of bliss at Dakshineswar didn't last long for Sarada Devi. In 1885 Master developed soreness in his throat which was later diagnosed as cancer. He stayed ill and needed extra care. He was taken from Dakshineswar to Shyampukur and later to Cossipore for his care. In both places she accompanied him. She continued to take care of his personal needs tirelessly. She would cook for him as well as large amount of meals to be served to the young devotees who lived there or who visited Master during that time.

Sri Ramakrishna's passing left a deep wound in Holy mother's heart. Few weeks after this event happened, with the encouragement from other devotees, she decided to go on a pilgrimage to some places in the north. After coming back from there, she performed the austerity of Five Fires, where she sat in, surrounded by fire pillars, fasting from sunrise to sunset.

The pilgrimage and austerities made her ready for spiritual leadership of the movement started by her husband. She became the first disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

Mother served the Master, her husband when he was alive and even after his passing away from this physical plane, she served his command of bringing light to the people. She took upon full responsibility of being mother to all the devotees. Just like the mother in a family cares for her children, she took care of everyone that sought her refuge. She showered unconditional love and blessings on everyone. She was mother and Guru in one.

Today on this day, celebrating her Janma tithi, we pay tribute to our Divine Mother, who was embodiment of compassion and purity, Supreme Goddess, Shakti herself. 



Motherhood of Holy Mother

Kakali Dasgupta

Pronams to Swamiji and thank you for this opportunity to speak on this auspicious day. Trying to define Motherhood of the Holy Mother is almost as impossible as trying to capture the vastness of an ocean in a small bottle. But I will try my best.

Growing up in a Bengali household in Kolkata, the presence of Holy Mother or Sri Sri Ma as she was reverentially called, was never far from us. Her calm gaze looked upon us either from the mantels of homes or from within the household Puja room. Her iconic picture with her long flowing hair was also familiar. Often times, I would see my own mother look a lot like that in her sari, with her long hair flowing down one side of her shoulders. Thus, Sarada Devi or Sri Sri Ma had a natural place of love and familiarity in my heart. It was much later that I found out how universal the sway of her love is for all her children. In her own words, she defined herself as “Ami Ma, Sokoler Ma” – I am Mother, everybody’s Mother.

But how did somebody born in a pious and very simple family in rural Bengal in 1853 attain this stature? It was by destiny -- she was predestined to become the perfect spiritual consort of Thakur Sri Ramakrishna and carry forth his teachings in a maternal attitude, or Matri Bhava. After her marriage at a very young age, Sree Ramakrishna started preparing young Sarada for the role she had to fulfill after his passing. This included not only spiritual education on how to live a life of devotion and purity, but also practical education on social interactions with family members and others. When Sarada Devi was 18, on the very auspicious day of Kalika Puja, Sree Ramakrishna worshipped her as a form of the Universal Goddess, by performing Shoroshi Puja.

At the end of the puja, he offered flower offerings at her feet and awakened the latent Shakti in her that would make it possible for her to continue his work as Jagat Janani, Mother of All.

As the young devotees started coming to Dakshineswar, drawn by the presence and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother dedicated herself to their well-being by cooking for them and looking after them with as much care and attention as any mother would. From her small room behind Sree Ramakrishna’s room in Dakshineswar, she would hear Thakur asking Narendra to stay over. Immediately she would start preparing a very simple meal of roti and cholar dal or split Bengal gram because Naren loved this preparation.

A young boy named Sarada, who later became Swami Trigunatitananda in monastic life, used to come to visit Thakur against his family’s wishes and quite frequently he did not have the money to go back home. Thakur would always tell him to go by Sri Sri Ma’s room also known as Nahabat ghar, and the young boy would find the coins he needed for his return journey, left by the doorside by the Mother.

Over and over again, reading the accounts of those fortunate enough to come into contact with Sri Sri Ma, one is struck by how similar their experiences were. They all felt her overwhelming kindness and care. They all mention the peace and joy that came from being in her presence and could not wait to relive that experience again. According to these first hand accounts, the addressing of Sarada Devi as ‘Mother’ was not merely a sign of respect. All those who met her became aware of an overwhelming maternal quality in her.

After the passing of Sri Ramakrishna, the presence of the Holy Mother kept the association of young men together and gave them a sense of

renewed faith and purpose. As Ramakrishna Math and Mission became an established monastery through the superhuman efforts of Swami Vivekananda and other brother monks, Sarada Devi continued to be the heart of the organization, revered by all as Sri Sri Ma or simply Ma, Mother. As Swami Vivekananda said, "Mother, I know this – with your blessings there will be a lot more Narens in the world, but there is only one Mother like you in this world and none other."

Sister Nivedita, who had a special closeness with the Mother, said this about her, "Dearest Mother, you are full of love. Your love is constant and serene. It does not have the excess of sentiment and emotion like we mortals have. Instead, the calmness of your love is otherworldly. It is full of peaceful benevolence and grace and never hurts anyone. Truly, you are God's greatest gift."

Swami Nikhilananda, Ma's direct disciple wrote: "Though she had no children of the flesh, she had many of the spirit."

In Sarada Ma's own words: "I am your true Mother, a mother not by virtue of being your guru's wife, nor by way of empty talk, but truly the mother."

And again, "I am the Mother of the virtuous as well as the wicked."

Surrounded by legions of her worshipful followers, the words of Thakur were thus fulfilled. Once Thakur consoled his mother-in-law who was upset that her daughter did not have children of her own, by saying – "Your daughter will be called Ma by so many people that she will tire of hearing it." Of course, our Mother will never tire of hearing from her children. My guru, Swami Swahananda Maharajji once told me, "Whatever you want to ask for, ask Mother. Thakur er kache kichu chaibe

na. Don't ask Thakur for anything." We are emboldened by the fact that the Mother herself has said, "My son, if a thorn pricks your foot it hurts me like a spear entering my heart. Never fear, whenever you are in distress, just say to yourself -- "I have a mother".

And again: "If my son wallows in the dust or mud, it is I who have to wipe off all the dirt and take him in my lap."

Her advice to her children was simple, "If you want peace, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger my child: the whole world is your own."

In the words of Khalil Gibran, "The most beautiful word on the lip of mankind is the word "Mother" and the most beautiful call is the call of 'My Mother'. It is a word full of hope and love, a sweet and kind word coming from the depths of the heart. The mother is everything – she is our consolation in sorrow, our hope in misery, and our strength in weakness. She is the source of love, mercy, sympathy and forgiveness."

Doesn't this capture fully the essence of Sri Sri Sarada Devi and her Motherhood? As her devotees, we are fortunate to receive the benediction and grace that flows from her to all her children and provides them with a source of strength and guidance through life.

On this auspicious day of Sri Sri Ma's Tithi Puja, I offer my heartfelt homage at the feet of Ma Sarada, our dearest Mother.

Joy Thakur – Joy Ma. 🍀

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This article is based on the talk delivered at Swami Vivekananda's Birth Anniversary celebration on February 4, 2024, at VVSC.

Swami Vivekananda: India's Ambassador to the US

Durgaprasad Rajaram

In *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* by His Eastern and Western Disciples it is mentioned that Swamiji once referred to himself as "condensed India". He was of course universal and in a way condensed humanity, but his love for India and the ideals of India especially were intense and unparalleled.

Before coming to America, Swami Vivekananda had traveled the length and breadth of India as a wandering monk. He saw, and knew the condition of India and her people. He also saw the eternal ideals that animate the Indian people. There could have been no better person to represent the nation and its ideals.

First, I want to highlight the historical setting in which Swami Vivekananda appeared in the United States. At that time in the late 1800s India, a land where civilization had blossomed and flourished over and over again for thousands of years, had been under centuries of conquests and foreign occupation and had been under British rule for at least 200 years. There was widespread poverty, lack of technological advance, and what Swamiji would refer to as a lack of Shraddha self-belief, faith and self-confidence, among the people.

On the other hand, the United States was a young, confident, materially prosperous country. The declaration of independence had been written just a little over 100 years before Swamiji arrived in the US and the Civil War had ended less than 30 years before. And America was an overwhelmingly Christian - largely Protestant - country. The number of people of Indian origin at that time in 1900 was about one thousandth of one percent of the population. It 1000 times that now.

So, the notion of India, awareness of India was minimal at best at that time. The prevalent idea in

the US and West was that India was a backward country, a colony of the British, a land of superstitions and idolatry and degradation, a nation and people who had to be civilized by the Western world. It is in this context that a penniless Indian monk in a strange dress set foot in Chicago on July 30, 1893.

Sister Nivedita describes the contrast of the worlds beautifully in her introduction to the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda: "Behind him....lay an ocean, calm with long ages of spiritual development. Behind him lay a world that dated itself from the Vedas, and remembered itself in the Upanishads, a world to which Buddhism was almost modern....Behind him, in short, lay India, with her thousands of years of national development", and "The vast audience that faced him represented exclusively the occidental mind"

In his very first address at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago titled 'Response to Welcome', Swamiji says: I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects....I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth."

In these few words we see the breadth and magnitude of what he was covering — Hinduism, India herself, and the ideals of tolerance and unity — and the treasures he would open to America and the rest of the world. Those of us here are very familiar with the message of Vedanta that Swamiji brought to the West. As he himself once said "I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East". The Hinduism and Vedanta

that Swamiji presented was not only ancient, but also a living religion with diverse practices, diverse philosophical traditions, a multitude of sects. And what Swamiji did was bring all these varied ideas and histories and philosophies and practices of Hinduism together. Sister Nivedita wrote in her introduction to the Complete Works "it may be said that when he began to speak, it was of the religious ideas of the Hindus; but when he ended, Hinduism had been created."

There are three main points I want to make in this regard. First — he established Vedanta as a coherent intellectual philosophy and all the varied Hindu sects and beliefs and schools of Vedanta as being different expressions, different paths to the same goal. Not only this, he presented Vedanta as a philosophy grounded in reason. This was important because it was the dawn of the age of modern science and the skepticism that came with it.

Second, the idea of all religions all faiths and sects being true. In his opening address he said "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.". And third — the ideals of Hinduism and Vedanta, that is renunciation and selfless service and Mukti — the idea of liberation, freedom, becoming Divine, by realizing the Divinity within. This grand idea inherent in Vedanta — of the innate Divinity of human beings, of all things was something Swamiji would proclaim again and again. In his "Paper on Hinduism" at the Parliament he said "the Hindu refuses to call you sinner....ye are the children of God.....sharers of Immortality.....It is a sin to call man a sinner"

These were revolutionary stunning ideas to a primarily Christian Protestant audience at that time. But these were the living treasures of the "thousands of years of development". To quote Sister Nivedita again, "it was the religious consciousness of India that spoke through him, the

message of his whole people, as determined by their whole past... India proclaimed through him to the modern world of the West."

This brings us to the next idea - Swamiji as an ambassador of India and her people. Swamiji's love for India - most of us here know about. As I mentioned before India was poorly understood at best, misunderstood largely or seen negatively. One of his great accomplishments of his visits to the US and the West was to set right the erroneous notions of India. He spoke of the history of India, the diversity in manners and customs, the intellectual, artistic, scientific, religious history and contributions to the world in arts and music, sciences and philosophy, ethics and religion. In his talk "India's Gift to the World" he spoke of India as the land "where stood the earliest cradle of ethics, arts, sciences, and literature". He spoke of Indian Womanhood, the ideals of Sita and Savitri — purity, forbearance, devotion, and the uniquely Hindu ideal of Woman as Mother, God as Mother. There is a talk where he seems to have even spoken on "The use of silver in India." All these were revelations to people who had never heard of India or had heard only negative things about India.

Some of the newspaper reports of that time give us an idea of the impact he had. "His culture, his eloquence, and his fascinating personality have given us a new idea of Hindoo civilization" Lucy Monroe of the Critic wrote. In the Memphis Commercial: "His ... lecture ...was a masterly appeal for brotherly love, and an eloquent defense of a beautiful faith.". In the Wisconsin State Journal: "The lecture.... contained much of sound philosophy and good religion. Pagan though he be, Christianity may well follow many of his teachings."

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And in the midst of all these — he never forgot the need of the Indian people. One of his aims during his first visit was to get some help from the West to improve the condition of Indian people. Even before his second visit to the west, in a letter to Sarala Devi, he wrote "My going.. is uncertain, but if I go, know that it too will be for India." Whether talking about Indian customs, or about Indian women, or highlighting the ideals of India - he didn't hide the need for growth in Indian society and he brought out the social needs of India. In a Q&A after one of his talks, he said the great need of India at that time was "missionaries

to educate the people industrially and socially and not religiously. The Hindoos have all the religion they want, and the Hindoo religion is the most ancient in the world" His love for India and his concern for India was perceptible to all. One newspaper report noted that: "His patriotism was perfervid. The manner in which he speaks of 'My country' is most touching. That one phrase revealed him not only as a monk, but as a man of his people."

In the West, Swamiji defended India when faced with hostile questions and misconceptions and did not give ground. In a letter to Alasinga Perumal he wrote "I am the one man who dared to defend his country and I have given them what they never expected from a Hindu." Of course when he returned to India — he did not spare Indians in his criticism and pointed out much that India must learn from the West.

Second, he did not put down Western society but rather admired and appreciated the social progress of the West and showed what India and America can learn from each other — the grand ideas of Vedanta — and the great social development. In this sense he was not only an ambassador but also bridge between India and the West.

And whom did Swamiji broadcast these ideas to? It was to a broad section of American society. He addressed orientalist and educated intellectuals and noted scientists. He spoke at universities and pulpits. He held classes for sincere seekers, and spoke to Midwestern audiences and miners who had never heard of India. He addressed Christian clergy some open-minded, and some hostile. He addressed inmates at a prison. He even spoke to children. A newspaper report of one of his talks concludes with "[Vivekananda] will speak on the Children of India to any children or young people who may be pleased to listen".

Finally, the lasting legacy he left behind. Swamiji spent about four years in the US between

his two visits. He did not merely make these visits, lecture, and leave. He gave people tangible spirituality. From Sister Christine, to Josephine McLeod, to Mr. Goodwin to Mrs. Ole Bull to numerous other American people — he gave spirituality and inspired sincere seekers of God. He set in motion the Vedanta movement in the US. He established the Vedanta Societies in New York and San Francisco and paved the way for the continuation of the Vedanta movement even after he became “a voice without a form”. The very fact that we are here today is because Swamiji established a lasting organization that continues to be inspired by his voice and works to carry out his teachings. And not just Vedanta Societies. The influx of Hindu, and Yoga teachers and Eastern thought that has come to America over the last 100+ years — Swamiji pioneered and opened the floodgates for all of that. There was an article in the New York Times about ten years ago titled “How Yoga Won the West” about how Swamiji influenced Western thinkers and writers and opened the door to Eastern thought.

Swamiji was not just an ambassador, but a pioneer, a visionary, a patriot, a mystic. And above all he was and continues to be an inspirer and

uplifter of people.

I'll conclude with a funny incident - it's recorded in Vol.5 of Swami Vivekananda in the West New Discoveries — the 6-volume book by Marie Louise Burke. Just before ascending the platform to give a lecture on India in San Francisco (very probably his lecture of March 5 at the Red Men's Building) he said to Mr. Allan, who was then acting as an usher, "When I get started on the subject of India, I never know when to stop. If I go on too long, attract my attention." "He began promptly at eight o'clock," Mr. Allan recalled, "and when it got to be ten o'clock we decided that I should attract his attention by swinging my watch from its chain. Standing at the back of the hall, I raised my hand and swung the watch. Swamiji quickly noticed. 'There they are,' he said, 'swinging the watch for me to stop when I have hardly got started.'" And then, as Mr. Allan often told the story in later years, "he went right on with the lecture." Such was Swamiji's love for India.

I shall end here with the hope that each one of us be inspired by Swamiji, and strive our best to put into practice at least some of the ideals he has placed before us.



“Renunciation, that is the flag, the banner of India, floating over the world, the one undying thought which India sends again and again as a warning to dying races, as a warning to all tyranny, as a warning to wickedness in the world. ... let not your hold of that banner go. Hold it aloft. Even if you are weak and cannot renounce, do not lower the ideal. Say, “I am weak and cannot renounce the world”, but do not try to be hypocrites, torturing texts, and making specious arguments, and trying to throw dust in the eyes of people who are ignorant. Do not do that, but own you are weak. For the idea is great, that of renunciation. ... Renunciation conquered India in days of yore, it has still to conquer India. Still it stands as the greatest and highest of Indian ideals — this renunciation. “

-- From a lecture delivered by Swami Vivekananda in Calcutta in 1897.

BHAGAVATA (22): THE SOUL OF BHAGAVATAM

Swami Ishatmananda

In the 3rd Skanda, 26th chapter, we discussed how the individual soul (जीवात्मा) was created. In verse 3/27/2, the great rishi Kapila said when the purusha, the Supreme Being अभिविषज्जते, that is, is influenced by the three qualities (गुणेषु) of nature (प्रकृति) - sattva, rajas, and tamas, He becomes overwhelmed by egoism (अहंकार) and that is जीवात्मा, the individual self.

Acharya Shankara in his highly appreciated vedantic text, Vivekachudamani, sloka 184 described the vijnanamaya kosha the intellect sheath. 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 action both subtle and gross. (This is jiva-atma, this is the source of 'I', ego (अहंकार).

The intellect sheath (vijnanamaya kosha), is exceedingly effulgent owing to its proximity to the supreme Self. It is a superimposition on the Self.

According to Bhagavata, when the Supreme Being, purusha comes close to prakriti, the latter gets activated, and an 'I' sense (अहंकार) evolves - that is jivatma (जीवात्मा).

According to Vedanta, the pure consciousness when reflected on the intellect (बुद्धि), which is associated with the five organs of knowledge (पञ्च ज्ञानेन्द्रिय), develops 'I' sense or Ego and that is jivatma (जीवात्मा).

You may ask - from where did this phenomenon, prakriti (प्रकृति), evolve?

Personalities like Ashtavakra, and Acharya Gaudapada teach us Ajata Vada (अजातवाद) - the doctrine that says there is no creation at all to begin with.

Understanding the limitation of our intellect, Acharya Shankara explains the creation as the creation of Maya or illusion (माया सृष्टि).

Maharshi Veda Vyasa explains the subtlest of subtle (sukshmati sukshma) Truth in a very

interesting way, in his great composition, the Bhagavatam, for all to understand.

Who is this Supreme Being? Vishnu.

What is this the universe (प्रपञ्च)? It is the Shakti or the Power of Vishnu.

According to Radhavinod Goswami, the word Vishnu means:

वेवोष्टि प्राकृत अप्राकृतं सर्वम व्याप्नोति इति विष्णु

That which covers everything, both the manifested and the unmanifested is Vishnu.

Who is this Great Lord Vishnu?

Let us go back to Sri Suka Deva, the son of Vyasa Deva, who was narrating the incidents to the Rishis and Ascetics

In Book 8 Chapter 5 sloka 15, Sri Suka said: "Once Indra was cursed by Rishi Durvasa. Being afraid, Indra, Varuna, Vayu, and other Devas went to Brahma for help.

Brahma said only He who is the creator of myself Brahma, Prajapati, Devas, Asuras, and others that are born of the womb or egg (अण्डज), or sweat (स्वेदज) or by germination from seeds (उद्भिज) can protect you, O Indra.

We shall all take shelter in the Supreme Being (8/5/21).

न यस्य वध्यो न च रक्षणीयो न उपेक्षणीयोः आदरानीयः पक्षः

तथापि सर्ग-स्थिति-सयंमार्थं धत्ते रजः-सत्त्व-तमासिं काले ॥ (8/5/22)

The Supreme Being is neutral (समदृष्टि). There is none he cares to destroy, protect, neglect, or welcome. Still, He assumes the qualities of sattva, rajas, and tamas as the time required for the preservation, creation, and dissolution of the Universe.

Then Brahma, Shiva, and other gods went to the abode of the Supreme Being. How is that place? The Bhagavatam describes तमसः परम् (8/5/24) as free from the taint of ignorance.

The Vedas also declare the existence of the Effulgent One who resides beyond the Ignorance, तमसः परस्तात् ॥

What is this ignorance?

Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna says "To know 'One' is knowledge, to think of 'Many' is Ignorance."

As long as the idea of many remains in the mind, we are under the veil of ignorance.

When through spiritual practices one reaches very close to realization then this ignorance appears before him as temptation.

Moses: The cloud of Mount Sinai

Jesus: Temptation

Buddha: Mara

Time and again it has been proved that to reach the light one has to pass through the darkness - तमसः परस्तात् ॥

In verses 26 through 50 of the 8th book (canto), 5th Chapter of Bhagavatam, Brahma describes the qualities of the Supreme Being who in reality is beyond any quality.

Who is this nirguna gunamay (निर्गुन गुणमय)?

The answer is Vishnu who is all pervading (सर्वं व्यप्नोतीति विष्णु) ॥

Brahma began the prayer with:

अविक्रियं सत्यमनन्तमाद्यं गुहाशयं निष्कलम
अप्रतर्क्यम्

मनो-अग्रयानां वचसानिरुक्तं नमामहे देव-वरं वरेन्यम्॥
(8/5/26)

We salute you O highest and most adorable being.

Then Brahma prays to the impersonal to become manifested as the personal god.

स त्वं नो दर्शय आत्मानमां अस्मत्-करण-गोचरम्।

प्रपन्नानां दिदक्षुणां सस्मितं ते मुखाम्बुजम्॥ (8/5/45)

May, O God, reveal to us, who have taken refuge in Thee and are eager to have your vision; kindly reveal your holy Self in a manner so that we can see you with our eyes.

In Bhagavatam, 1st through 9th cantos are dedicated to Vishnu and the description of His devotees. The 10th and 11th cantos are dedicated to Sri Krishna.

Then Sri Shuka described how the formless, All pervading, Supreme Being for the benefit of the human being took Form. In the words of Shuka,

तेनैव सहसा सर्वे देवाः प्रतिहतेक्षणाः।

न अपश्यन् खां दिशः क्षैणीम आत्मानं च कुतो विभुम्॥
(8/6/2)

Dazzled by that brilliance, the devas could not perceive the sky, the quarters, the ground, or themselves. How then could they see the supreme atman?

Only Brahma and Shiva could see the beautiful form of the formless. In 5 verses (3-7) Bhagavata described the form of the Lord known as Vishnu thus:

Deep blue in complexion, beautiful eyes, wearing a pure bright yellow silk- taintless like molten gold; The Lord has well-formed and attractive limbs, face and forehead, wearing wonderful crown and Jewelleries, holding Sudarsan, His weapon and Sri manifesting from His chest.

अजात-जन्म-स्थिति-संयमाया गुणाय निर्वाण-
सुखार्णवाय।

अणोरणिम्नेऽपरिगण्य-धाम्ने महानुभावाय नमो नमस्ते॥
(8/6/8)



“O King! Though the age of Kali is full of evils there is also a great good quality in this age. In the age of Kali by the mere chanting and singing (keertana) of the names of Krishna one is released from his attachments and attains to the highest Truth.”

-- Bhagavatam, 12.3.51

Introduction to the Cover Page :: The Magical Word

Pravrajika Matriprana

Sarada Convent

Vedanta Society of Southern California

“Vanish” -- a word that is used in the magic show very frequently. It is a magical word. Almost all of us at least once at some point in life wished either to vanish some person, or some situation, or our own self! However, before vanishing, comes “seeing”. It is necessary to note that in Sanskrit seeing or perspective is called *darshan*, which also means philosophy.

This visible universe appears according to the viewer's perception. As soon as time, space, and causation are changed, perception also gets altered, and the world appears in another way. Two parallel rails, which in reality can never meet, appear to merge in one point when viewed looking towards the horizon. The duality of two rails vanishes. That is the vanishing point.



Credit: Wikipedia

The more one moves towards the horizon, the further that merging point also shifts. The vanishing point is not an ultimate reality, but it seems to be there. Like *samsara – samyak sarati iti* – it keeps changing rightly; always it is a subject to change.

Within it exists a point, bereft of apparent duality, called the vanishing point. The vanishing point is used as part of the system of perspective, which enables the creation of the illusion of the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional picture surface.

In art, the vanishing point represents the point at which parallel lines appear to converge – the

point where converging lines meet, bringing together opposites in a unified perspective. That point earned an important position in the development of philosophy, and art through the core of human civilization.

The study of this singularity revolutionized art in 15th-century Europe. Italian Renaissance artists began applying the principles of linear perspective into their art from the 1420s onwards.

In Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," the vanishing point coincides with Jesus's right eye. It is to be remembered that a vanishing point does not have any shape or color. Linear perspective organizes the painting, making it seem like it is happening in a real space and also directing our eye to the most important part of the scene.

Usually, a landscape with multiple vanishing points cannot exist in two-dimensional space (Artist Escher is an exception). The vanishing point shows how to conquer the fundamentals of perspective drawing, and then it equips the painter with technical tricks and tools that make dynamic and complex scenes a snap. Based on its understanding, one can draw anything they can imagine.



Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper". (Wikipedia)

For an artist, it creates depth and meaning in a two-dimensional space. In still photography, the vanishing point is an important tool to calibrate a focused camera, while in moving photography or cinematography, a vanishing point plays a versatile role by fading out scenes.

Even any book — and the approach it stands for — has a vanishing point. The invisible place that determines its points of view, hiding as a utopian perspective: a u-topos or “*view from nowhere.*”

Geometrically, the vanishing point can be located and removed from the view, but practically it is not possible, as we can see things within our visual field but not the field itself. A point will be formed within the new field. Philosophers like Hume, Berkeley, and many others studied optical illusions from metaphysical perspectives. In fact, at the beginning, optics was a subject for philosophical studies; mathematical development came much later.

For a spiritual seeker, dealing with the exploration of infinite or transcendent aspects of existence, the vanishing point can symbolize the pursuit of understanding these infinite dimensions beyond the material world. For them, it is the point that represents the search for higher meaning, purpose, or connection to something greater, whether it be the universe, a higher power, or collective consciousness, transcending the boundaries of the self.

The shift in perception alters the vanishing point. Spirituality can shift one's perception of reality, leading to a deeper understanding of oneself and the world. Spirituality involves reconciling dualities such as mind and body, material and spiritual, or individual and collective. It is a process of integration and synthesis leading towards wholeness and harmony.

Technically, the vanishing point is a representational gap that organizes the visual field. A study of the metaphysics of personal identity in the light of the vanishing point may

develop a deeper understanding of self-absence. It seems that a vanishing point is visible. But actually, it is an absence. More of a feature than a point. It shifts as the viewer moves. Implicated in one's optical illusions; as clouds seem to form the stairway to heaven.

An absence can be of two types: shadow and hole. In the first case, the self is seen not as a material thing but as the absence of otherness, just as a shadow is an absence of light. In the second case, philosophers see the self as a boundary that contains nothing inside. Both theories have many objections, though they deserve a little more discussion.

This play of light, shadow, and vanishing point involves the question of presence and absence of an identity. Light has two properties: wave and particle. Particle properties are effective in the realm where wave properties are not recognizable, and vice versa. The medium of light waves is space or an immaterial host itself. The absence of life is death. Metaphysicist Wittgenstein characterized death as a limit. He said, 'Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. In the same way, our visual field is without boundary, our life is endless.' In the Giza pyramid complex, from the biggest pyramid, the line of sight across the next two pyramids slopes down toward a vanishing point. It might be considered an architectural allusion to death.

The cover image (credit: Wikipedia) shows the corridor of Ramanathaswamy Temple, the longest among all Hindu temples in India, with 1212 pillars converging to a dot. It is located at Rameshwaram and is considered a holy pilgrimage site for Shaivites, Vaishnavites, and Smartas. As if this shrine is a vanishing point of three streams of Hinduism.

According to some versions of the Ramayana, after conquering Lanka, upon the advice of sages,

Rama, the 7th incarnation of Vishnu, along with his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana, installed and worshipped the lingam (an iconic symbol of Shiva) here to expiate the sin incurred while killing Ravana (who was a Brahmin). Historically speaking, Fergusson believes the small vimana in the west corridor belongs to the 11th or 12th century. The height of each temple pillar is about 30 feet from the floor to the center of the roof.

In architecture, pillars are needed for the support, stability, strength, and endurance of buildings. Similarly, in spirituality, God, the pillar in the life of a spiritual aspirant, is the support of foundational beliefs, values, and practices on their spiritual journey. God comes in the form of the guru. Sri Ramakrishna's instruction is to have *"Faith in the guru's words. You should depend on his instruction. Do your duties in the world, holding fast to his words, like a person whirling round and holding fast to a pillar."*

And this journey, with God as the pillar, and the guru as the guide, takes one through stages where the perception of the world and reality shifts and culminates in that state where the world of duality vanishes and merges into oneness.

Let us then go on this journey with Sri Ramakrishna. Quoting the Upanishad, Totapuri, guru of Sri Ramakrishna instructed, *"Dive deep in search of the Self and realize It through Samadhi. You will find the world of name and form vanishing into void, and the puny ego dissolving in Brahman-Consciousness. You will realize your identity with Brahman, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute."* Sri Ramakrishna followed his guru's word and reached that vanishing point.

Sri Ramakrishna himself, as a guru, imparted this experience to his best disciple Narendranath unasked on his very second visit itself. Let's read from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna what actually happened. *"at the touch of the Master, Narendra felt overwhelmed and saw the walls of the room and everything around him whirling and vanishing. 'What are you doing to me?' he cried in terror. 'I have my father and mother at home.' He saw his own ego and the*

whole universe almost swallowed in a nameless void. With a laugh the Master easily restored him." This experience of attaining the vanishing point was 'given' to Naren. It did not last long. Later, through his own austerity, he made this point his own. That is a different story.

The reason behind perceiving the world as duality is that the sense organs and the mind are running outwardly. Spiritual practice is to control these five organs of knowledge along with the mind, through the mind. The Master also said that one's pure mind is one's guru. When one sincerely calls upon God, they are bound to have the vision of God. He himself is the testimony to it. Swami Saradananda wrote in the Great Master, *"Then, when the I-consciousness vanished this way, he had for some time the direct vision of the divine Mother, the cause of the universe. Not satisfied with that three-day vision he tried to have it eternally. This time externally, the symptoms of death appeared on the body and internally, the unobstructed vision of the Mother continued. ... Thus sometimes, the vanishing of the I-consciousness, the complete cessation of mental modifications and the full direct vision of the divine Mother; again, sometimes, the coming into existence of a little I-consciousness, the manifestation to a small extent of the modifications of the mind and simultaneously a slightly obstructed vision of the divine Mother happened again and again."*

He remained in that state for six continuous months. *"Then the Mother of the universe or the divine Lord or the cosmic Consciousness, who is manifested as the universe, pervading in and through all beings, conscient and inconscient and appears as diverse names and forms — commanded the Master, "Remain in Bhava- mukha..."*

Swami Saradananda put whole-hearted effort in explaining what Bhavamukha is. He wrote, *"at that time [of his sadhana] the I-consciousness of the Master sometimes vanished altogether and sometimes reappeared just a little. Even when that little of I-consciousness returned, the universe did not appear to him as it does to us. The world appeared to him as an 'immense mind' in which innumerable waves of ideas*

were rising, surging and merging. The Master's own body, mind and I-consciousness, not to speak of those of others, seemed to be but a component wave in that immense mind. In that state the Master had the direct experience and vision of the real nature of that universal consciousness and power as 'One without a second', as living and wide-awake and as the creator of all wills and actions, as the Mother of infinite grace ... The Master further saw that that 'One without a second' is Itself divided in two aspects of Saguna (with attributes) and Nirguna (without attributes). It is this that is called "a difference in Itself", Swagata-bheda, in the scriptures — that an immense I-ness pervading everything from Brahma down to the lowest created being was manifested in it.

He saw that an infinite number of waves of ideas was rising in, that cosmic mind; that the limited I-s of men perceived these ideal waves in parts and mistook them as the external world ...

He realized that beings with limited I-s performed their works with the strength of that unlimited-I though they are unable to fathom that unlimited one. So, they regarded themselves as possessors of free will and the power of action. This spiritual blindness is called in the scriptures Avidya or ignorance. "It is this universal I-ness existing between the aspects of Saguna and Nirguna that is called Bhavamukha; for, infinite ideas owe their manifestations to that all-pervading I-ness. Bhavamukha is the source of all ideas, and when seen from the other side, it is a converging point of all dualities; perhaps a vanishing point?

Philosophically, the Vaishnava teachers of Bengal have characterized this universal self as Sri Krishna, the embodiment of pure consciousness, which is of the nature of an "inconceivable difference in non-difference" (Achintya-bhedabheda).

After Bhavamukha, Swami Saradananda discussed nirvikalpa samadhi. When the I-consciousness of the Master vanished altogether, he remained in oneness with the unqualified being of the divine Mother beyond the limits of this all-pervading.

And with the vanishing of this ubiquitous I, vanished also the last vestige of the infinite waves of ideas in that I-waves which go by the name of the universe. Again when a little I-consciousness manifested itself in him he saw both the Saguna immense I and all the ideas in it, united with the Nirguna aspect of the divine Mother. In other words, as soon as he attained the Nirguna state, the existence of the difference-in-itself in that "One without a second" vanished from the Master's consciousness. And when he was conscious of that Saguna immense I-ness, he felt that that which was then Shakti was verily that Brahman. Saguna was indeed that which Nirguna was. Prakriti (the material cause of the universe) was really that which Purusha (pure Consciousness) was.

Attainment of this vanishing point is not a temporary magic but a permanent transformation and a result of long, loving spiritual practice with a one-pointed mind. This is perfectly demonstrated perfectly, and practically during Sri Ramakrishna's final days through a discussion with M, the writer of his Gospel. The Master asked M about the significance of his illness, "Can you explain one thing? How is it that in spite of all these visions, all this ecstasy and samadhi, I am so ill?" ...

M shared an excellent observation, "A change is coming over your mind. It is being directed toward the formless aspect of God. Even your ego of Knowledge is vanishing." Sri Ramakrishna did not deny. Supporting M, he said, "That is true. My teaching of others is coming to an end. I cannot give any more instruction. I see that everything is Rama Himself. And sometimes I say to myself, 'Whom shall I teach?' ... He was silent a few moments. Presently he went into samadhi.

Regaining consciousness of the outer world, he said to M., "I saw everything passing from form to formlessness. I want to tell you all the things I saw, but I cannot. Well, this tendency of mine toward the formless is only a sign of my nearing dissolution. Isn't that so? ... "Even now I am seeing the Formless Indivisible Satchidananda - just like that."



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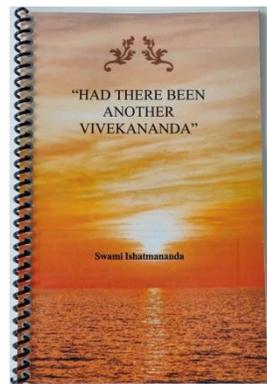
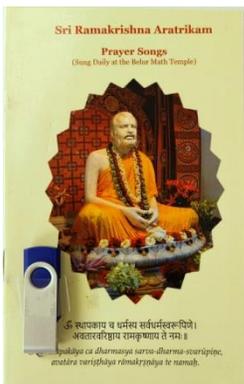


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