

# VEDANTA and the West

**176**

BENJAMIN SALTMAN  
*What Vedanta Means to Me*

SWAMI VIDYATMANANDA  
*A Real Devotee*

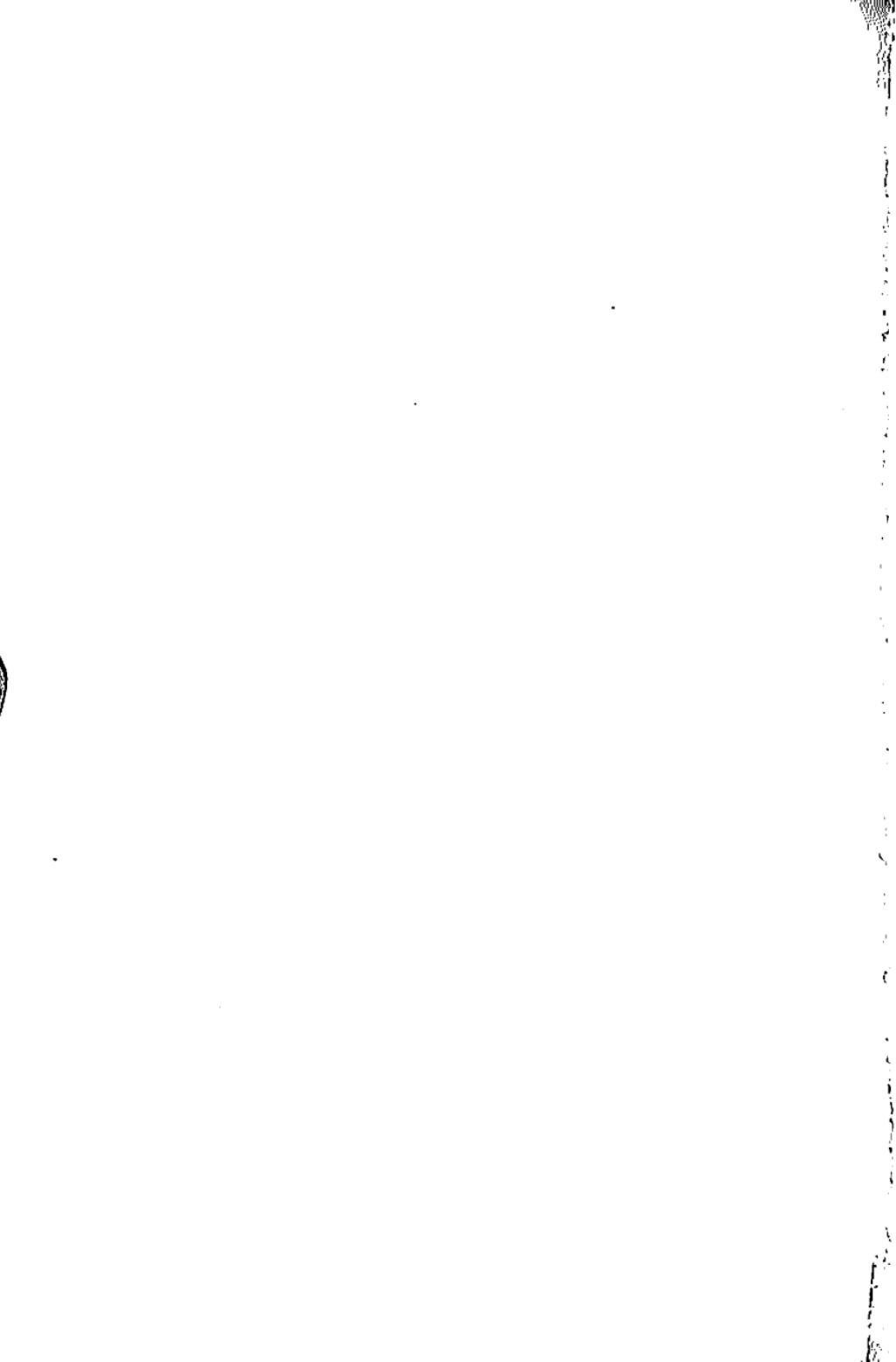
DOROTHY F. MERCER: *Contrasts*

SWAMI BUDHANANDA  
*Universal Imperatives  
Of the Bhagavad-Gita*



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# VEDANTA

## and the West

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## WHAT VEDANTA MEANS TO ME

BENJAMIN SALTMAN

FOR ABOUT two years I have been thinking about what Vedanta means to me. Until now I have been unable to write anything, but recently I have come to understand that Vedanta means one central thing to me: the guru. With the guru comes religion; without the guru, the individual gropes among scriptures and dogmas, inspired here, confused there.

The guru is the voice of God. Through him comes the answer to my question: what shall I do to find God? The answer comes through the guru, through his instructions, through his presence. The way he walks and smiles is the answer, and the way he talks of God, with certainty, with devotion, without sentimentality—that also is the answer.

After all, what can I achieve with only a concept of God? By profession, I am a teacher. I live with concepts; I am always trying to distill form from experience, trying to see experience as an abstraction that can be handled and grouped with other abstractions. I love ideas, but I also know that they are treacherous, ambiguous; they can be used for evil or for good; they have been twisted to suit fantastic prejudices. A concept of God is not enough.

I think I began to know what religion is when I saw it walking around in the person of the guru. Then I knew that religion was *this* peace, *this* firmness of mind, *this* childlike honesty, fearless and gentle.

As an American I share the pluralist confusions of my time and my country. Never before have so many voices addressed men from so many points of view. The problem now is not survival; it is direction, the choice of a path which will somehow satisfy us beyond the moment. We are less in danger of starvation than of self-destruction. The most difficult thing for an American to do is to ask himself what he is doing. It seems better not to know, better to go from day to day reaching for the brass rings of a materialistic society, better to tell oneself that there is nothing else to reach for. But when he does ask the question, knowing that he cannot avoid asking it, he must realize, as I had to realize, that he cannot live his life except in an ultimate context. He must ask a total question, he must ask a religious question: what is God? Into that question, if he has asked it totally, he has poured all of himself. He has not merely asked a metaphysical question; he wants to know God, experience God, talk with him, be filled with him, realize him in the deepest part of his soul, be united with him forever, end fear and ignorance forever.

But as a beginner can he really ask this question? No, he can only mew weakly; even in the grip of worldly misery, even when he shouts in pain, he cannot ask the total question, which must be asked with the bones, muscles, and nerves, which must be asked getting up in the morning and lying down at night. He does not even know whether what he feels is God's presence or not. He reads about saints; they are inspiring, but they seem odd and extreme; they seem to be

supermen. He goes to a church. Is this smell of incense religion? Are these pictures religion?

Perhaps he reads, in the Upanishads, "That thou art." The brief sentence may well express the greatest moment of insight man has ever had, but what does it mean? What does it mean to me when I am drinking a cup of coffee? What does it mean in a land of astronauts and *Mary Poppins*, surfing and Civil Rights? When I think of "That thou art," perhaps I feel a thrill very much like a thrill of ego satisfaction. Am I indeed God? Perhaps I am, indeed; but what a miserable God!

I need an answer. I must see what happens when the words of scripture actually live in a man, and I must place myself under the guidance of that man. This is what Vedanta is to me: the guidance of my spiritual life by a spiritually advanced teacher, whose most casual words tell me something of the meaning of "That thou art," of "The Kingdom of God is within you," "Blessed are the meek." He gives me a mantra, which is like my private key to God's room. He interprets my spiritual experiences, he embodies holiness, he demonstrates by the fact that he lives and breathes, smiles and sleeps, that wholeness is feasible, that God is near and is not embarrassed by the skin of man. He leads me to God's feet, his love opens the possibility of love. Whatever my failings may be, whatever my sorrows and bondage, I am blessed.

Is religion anything else? Rituals, dogmas, laws of conduct all have their place. Philosophy has its place. And perhaps the highest place, according to the instructions of the guru, belongs to meditation. But religion is the guru; it is Moses coming down from Mount Sinai carrying the Tables of the Law, his countenance transfigured, shining. The Children of Israel saw in that shining face what it means to know God, to experience him. I see no other religion.

I SINCERELY believe that men have no quarrel about whether or not God exists. They all confess to the limitations of their knowledge. The real quarrel seems to be over the question of how God manifests himself. It is easy enough to say that God manifests himself in the love that men bear one another. But where is that love? It is easy enough to say that God revealed himself two thousand years ago. But where is he now? It is easy enough to argue for God's benevolence working through nature. But where is that benevolence? No, we must see him in a living saint whom we can touch.

In the long run, my religious life is my own: I must have the inner confirmation of my heart's experience. No one can realize God for me; I am responsible. I would be foolish to deny that at times charlatans set themselves up as gurus and proceed to delude spiritual aspirants. I must make a choice. Furthermore, the guru who I think is holy may be considered quite ordinary by another man. There is no automatic way to God, no objective measure of holiness. But the guru, the living vessel of God, is the closest we can come on earth, with earthly eyes, to a vision of the complete answer to the complete question. To me, therefore, the guru and the guru-disciple relationship is at the heart of Vedanta. It has taken me two years to realize it.

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## A REAL DEVOTEE

SWAMI VIDYATMANANDA

THE TIME is Christmas Eve, 1963. The place is the great temple of Sri Ramakrishna at Belur Math on the Ganges. In a few days the final and most important celebrations marking the Centenary of the birth of Swami Vivekananda are to take place. Swamis, brahmacharis, and devotees have traveled to the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission from many parts of India. From other places in the Far East, from Europe, and from America additional visitors have come. On the evening of which I write, many of these people are assembled in the temple for the annual worship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A temporary altar has been set up in the nave of the temple at right angles to the shrineroom. All afternoon the brahmacharis of Belur Math, assisted by students from nearby Ramakrishna schools, have been busy decorating the altar. Many kinds of food, especially dishes popular in the West, have been set out as offerings. In the center of the altar stands a beautiful colored picture of the Madonna and Child.

My eyes are drawn to this picture. For I have heard the story of where it came from and why it is here: "The picture of Christ they were using at Belur Math was small and not very well printed. I decided that, when passing through Europe on my way home, I would purchase the finest print I could obtain, of a good painting of the Madonna and Child; and I would send it to Belur Math for their Christmas

worship." This is what Dorothy Mercer had told me in Hollywood, after her return from India in 1959.

Now I am at Belur Math, and there before me is Dorothy's gift on the Christmas shrine. And Dorothy is dead. She never saw, will never see, the present she gave in its place of honor.

Dorothy loved India. Her trip in 1958-59 wrought a great change in her. True, Dorothy Mercer had always been a Vedantist; but India turned Dorothy into a Real Devotee.

WHO WAS Dorothy Mercer? I shall try to describe, for those who did not know her, something of Dorothy's life and personality. And those who were her friends, in India and in the West, will perhaps be pleased, by reading these words, to think of her once again. I write about Dorothy because of friendship and a desire to preserve a little longer the memory of a fine person.

More than that, I write about Dorothy because she stands for something important. The example she provided offers proof that what the scriptures tell us, what the teachers say, is true. Religion *does* work. Religion worked for Dorothy. The last years of her life were marked by a growing sweetness of character. The final stage, so tragic, was made bearable by Dorothy's faith. And her death can only be called wonderful, as the death of a real devotee must be.

IN THE early 1950's, Dorothy Mercer contributed to *Vedanta and the West* magazine a personal statement on "What Vedanta Means to Me." This was later published, along with fifteen other articles on that subject, in a book of the same title.

In her story Dorothy tells how she had been associated

with Vedanta from her very birth, at San Francisco in 1901. "I was born into the Vedanta," she says. Dorothy's family attended the Vedanta Society of Northern California. The swami in charge from 1903 to 1914 was Swami Trigunatita, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Dorothy recalls that, although she was just a little girl, she was greatly impressed by Swami Trigunatita. Now and then he would come to her home to visit her parents, her, and her brother. At least once, Dorothy remembers, Swami Trigunatita held her on his lap. Once every week Dorothy used to go with her mother to the Hindu Temple at 2963 Webster Street, San Francisco, to see the Swami. "To others," she recalls, "Swami's office was cluttered up; to me it was finely ordered. There were stereopticon slides, a revolving globe of the world, Swami's resplendent watch fob, a roll-top desk piled high with papers; and no 'don't touch' admonitions." Finally, "There was a round, red, stained-glass window opening on the street which, on our last visit to his office, Swami told me was a motion picture." Later in her article Dorothy explains that the Swami had used this device to teach her that worldly things which one may think are real are only a passing show, having no lasting substantiality at all.

Later, as a young woman, Dorothy became acquainted with a second direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Abhedananda. He lived and worked in the San Francisco region from 1918 to 1921. "Not only did I go to all of Abhedananda's lectures and classes, but during this period I read Swami Vivekananda assiduously. I too wanted to be a philosopher, a sannyasin no less." Here Dorothy quotes from Swamiji's "Song of the Sannyasin":

Strike off thy fetters! Bonds that bind thee down,  
Of shining gold. . . .

"That I had no 'shining gold' to 'strike off' did not deter me from marching right along—in imagination."

By doing office work to earn funds to attend the university, Dorothy gained a good education and eventually became a college teacher. She took one of her degrees at Oxford at the time Dr. S. Radhakrishnan was there as Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics. For many years Dorothy was an instructor in English at San Francisco City College. Among other subjects, she taught the Bhagavad-Gita as literature.

Dorothy died of cancer on Thursday, March 8, 1962, in San Francisco. Curiously, in 1962 Sri Ramakrishna's birthday fell on that very same day, March 8. There was no funeral. Dorothy had willed her body to the University of California Medical School.

ALTHOUGH she lived most of the year in San Francisco, Dorothy used to travel south frequently. She had long vacations from her college at Christmastime and in the summer. Dorothy was a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and was a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda. She often spent her holidays as a guest at the Hollywood ashrama. Over a period of years we grew to know Dorothy rather well.

Dorothy was nearly six feet tall. She wore spectacles. She was somewhat professorial in manner. Being slightly deaf; and furthermore, being accustomed to addressing large classes of college students, she talked loudly and with intense positiveness. In the days before 1959, our dinner table was the scene for many strong pronouncements. Dorothy had an intense interest in Plato; probably one reason she liked Plato was that she felt the philosophy of Plato substantiated the philosophy of Vedanta, in Western terms. But Dorothy's in-

terests were wide. She was an enthusiastic liberal, and had strong convictions on the many situations in the world which were not, in her eyes, what they should be.

Being firmly convinced of the superiority of Vedanta, Dorothy could not see how anyone could but accept its teachings. Indeed as Dorothy herself once jested, in her defense of the tolerant Vedanta her attitude almost bordered on intolerance. In 1957 she started writing a book for Western readers, whose purpose was to set forth the logicality of Vedanta philosophy. As part of this effort Dorothy conceived the idea of distributing a questionnaire, to be answered by members of Vedanta societies in America, telling of their satisfaction with the faith they had accepted. This questionnaire was sent to more than two hundred Vedanta members, of whom nearly half responded. Dorothy felt that the first-hand testimonies of the respondents were useful in providing facts supporting the special excellence of Vedanta theory and practice.

We in Hollywood could see, of course, that beneath her academic exterior Dorothy had a good sense of humor and was basically lovable and loving. She certainly was most generous. Still and all, she was very argumentative, very severe in her judgments of those having views differing from her own. In those pre-1959 days, we at the Vedanta Society of Southern California mostly thought of Dorothy as a well-meaning, but rather dry, intellectual.

THEN in 1958-59, on a sabbatical from her college, Dorothy went to India. She stayed from November through March, and as a ward of the Ramakrishna Mission, toured India with characteristic energy. In the letters she wrote to Hollywood, in a detailed account of her pilgrimage composed in India and airmailed to us from abroad, and most of all in the

changed attitudes she manifested upon her return, we saw the emergence of a different person.

It can easily be imagined that many things in India were upsetting to Dorothy. She was an idealist, to whom every human's economic well-being, opportunity for social progress, and physical welfare meant much. The poor conditions she saw distressed her deeply.

Yet the goodness she encountered: the sweetness of the people, the charm of the children, the devotional qualities expressed by common men and women—these more than made up for all sights of human misery. And particularly touching was the affection expressed toward her by many swamis of the Ramakrishna Order.

Dorothy wrote just before leaving India, in a letter dated March 23, 1959, and postmarked at Belur Math: "This is the last letter from this beloved address." In that letter she went on to describe how a number of young men, who had just been initiated into sannyas and brahmacharya on Ramakrishna's birthday, had come to the quarters she shared with two or three Western visitors, to perform their first act of ceremonial begging. "The day after Sri Ramakrishna's birthday," the account goes, "the new swamis and brahmacharis came to us to beg. To feed forty-nine young men radiant with love is quite an experience. On Sri Ramakrishna's birthday they [the sannyasins-to-be] attended their own funeral; the day after they were reborn in God. They were living in such a beautiful, bright haze that we were almost overcome. [One of our members] had to leave the room, he was so close to tears. I wasn't close to tears; I seemed to partake of their happiness."

The account of her experiences, which Dorothy sent to us before her return, was equally indicative. In her descriptions of the holy places she had gone to in India, the rituals she

had witnessed, the devotional qualities she had observed, we saw that Dorothy had truly understood and appreciated the spirit of the country. Perhaps the most revealing statement in the article was that she mentioned, with obvious pleasure, that she was addressed by Indians as "Mother Dorothy." Mother Dorothy! We could imagine nothing less characteristic of the person we knew than that she would appear motherly—and moreover, that she should take pleasure in so appearing and in being so addressed. Obviously, something had happened to Dorothy.

After her return from India, Dorothy continued to spend her vacations with us. But now the subject matter of our table conversations was very different. Dorothy talked of nothing but the people and places she had known in India, connected with Sri Ramakrishna and his Math and Mission. She often described the love expressed by several of the senior swamis: Gurudas Maharaj (Swami Atulananda) whom she had known as a little girl in San Francisco; Swamis Madhavananda and Dayananda, who had worked for a time in the mid-twenties at the Vedanta Society of Northern California and were already known to her; Swami Sankarananda, the President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission; "lovable" Bharat Maharaj (Swami Abhayananda); and "dear" Suji Maharaj (Swami Nirvanananda). The inspiring, and the bizarre, experiences she had had now made up the table talk. The old argumentative, didactic personality had vanished. How comfortable it was now to be with Dorothy! It was obvious to us that, as one of our number remarked: "India made Dorothy a devotee."

BUT THERE was not much time remaining for Dorothy to enjoy India in retrospect. She had been vouchsafed her ex-

perience; it had done for her what was to be done; and she was soon to vanish from this world. In the summer of 1961 Dorothy came to stay with us in Hollywood as usual. But by August she was experiencing certain physical difficulties and thought it best to hasten back to her doctor in San Francisco. It was discovered that Dorothy had cancer of a type which spreads with great rapidity. She was almost continually in the hospital from the autumn on until she died in the following spring.

During the fall and winter we did not hear from Dorothy directly. We do not know what her thoughts consisted of during this time. Probably she kept her silence because, with typical independence—and perhaps with a new evenness of mind—she did not want to make herself a problem to others. But we kept informed as to her condition through some of her relatives who lived in San Francisco. In late February these relatives let us know that Dorothy probably had very little longer to live. I was sent to San Francisco, as a representative of Swami Prabhavananda and Dorothy's many friends at the Vedanta Society, to express the love of those in Hollywood and to see whether there was anything she needed or wanted. I took with me a small vial of precious Ganges water. It is customary in India for those who are about to die to take Ganges water, thus feeling blessed and purified. Dorothy knew about this custom.

The person I saw, when I walked into Dorothy's hospital room, was almost unrecognizable. Dorothy had grown so old and thin it was heartbreaking. As best I could I gave the messages from Hollywood. On her part, in halting voice, interrupted by spells of weakness, Dorothy spoke again of the familiar, sweet experiences of her happy time in India.

I went back to see Dorothy the following day. "Dorothy," I asked, "is there anything you need, anything that anyone

can do for you? Swami Prabhavananda will come to see you, if you want him to. And, Dorothy, maybe you would like to have this." I placed the small bottle on the bedside table. "It is Ganges water."

For a moment Dorothy was almost like her old severe self again. "I am not going to die. I am going to recover. It is very dear of Swami to offer to come to see me. But it will not be necessary at all." But I think it was then that Dorothy made her final surrender. Within a week she had sent word that, yes, she would appreciate seeing her guru.

Swami Prabhavananda went to San Francisco to see Dorothy on March 2. Dorothy accepted with great devotion the Ganges water that the Swami gave to her. She said she knew what it meant. She told the Swami: "I know I am going to die; and it is all right." She said that she was maintaining, every moment, the recollectedness of Sri Ramakrishna. She said: "I know that Swami Trigunatita is going to come for me." And this is how, six days later, it was.

AT THE end of her "What Vedanta Means to Me," written long before, Dorothy quotes her beloved Plato: ". . . whereby being near to and married with true being, and begetting reason and truth, he came to knowledge and true life and nourishment, and then, and only then, ceased from the travail of his soul." Dorothy concludes her article with a query: "Why should not the small hope I have had after every fleeting glimpse of true being sustain me now in a larger hope? Can I not too be nourished? Am I not a legitimate child of the Divine Mother as Sri Ramakrishna reminded his devotees?"

To this question the answer is now known: A positive, reassuring Yes.

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## CONTRASTS

DOROTHY F. MERCER

BELUR MATH can be approached in three ways: via the Ganges, via a turnstile from a neighboring residential area, and via the Grand Trunk Road north and south. By far the most dramatic approach is by way of the Grand Trunk Road. Built by the British for military purposes and running from Calcutta to Delhi and beyond, the Grand Trunk Road in Howrah (a suburb north of Calcutta) is one of the most teeming and noisy, albeit fascinating, thoroughfares in the world. The dust and carbon monoxide are almost as hard on the throat and eyes as the smog in Los Angeles; and the odor almost as pungent as that once given off by San Francisco Bay at low tide.

The dust is stirred up by bullock-drawn carts with heavy loads of jute, bamboo, scrap-iron; by man-drawn carts with equally heavy loads; by the wandering cows; by jog-trotting men with man-dwarfing packs on their heads of unthreshed grain or mattresses or aluminum pots; by what we Americans would call picturesque horse-drawn carriages, but in Howrah functional objects of pride to their owners; by donkeys loaded so immensely that they can scarcely be seen for the load; by crowded-to-capacity and beyond capacity busses; by loaded-to-capacity auto trucks; by man-drawn and bicycle-drawn

rickshaws; by private autos and taxis often antiquated; by people walking—men, women, children, babies.

Except for the sky and trees, everything seems to move in an incessant struggle for position. What the density of population is, I do not know. That it is very dense is obvious to the most casual observer. The density has been increased by the refugees from East Bengal, now East Pakistan. The partition of Bengal is unnatural and its results are appalling.

A HALF block off the Grand Trunk Road and through a high gate in a high fence is the Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math. Suddenly the noise stops, and the music of birds is heard. Cows are quietly ruminating, grazing, lying down on the green and clean grass. Lovely old trees, also green and clean, some blossoming, shade the area. In front is the Hooghly, as the principal branch of the Ganges is called. A high brick wall keeps it from washing into the compound at high tide; and from the wall or from the broad brick steps leading down into the holy water can be seen the river life going quietly by.

The Ganges, like the Grand Trunk Road, compared to Belur Math presents a study in contrast. Wide and swiftly flowing, the gray-brown river water contrasts with the green grass of the compound. On the river are man-rowed boats mostly; but there are also sailboats, steamboats, modern motorboats. Practically all are gray or brown, including the men who stand and jointly row rhythmically as they probably did a thousand or more years ago. Occasionally, a dead fish or something else edible will float to the surface of the water; it is immediately consumed by the constantly watching vultures. Flying high, the vulture concentrates on what is low. Low and not flying at all, the sadhus—swamis and brahmacharis—of the compound concentrate on what is high.

Or, metaphorically and more exactly, the vulture never leaves the ground whereas the sadhu never sets foot on it.

The temple of Sri Ramakrishna dominates the Belur Math compound. It is a magnificent, beige-colored sandstone building, with a spacious marble-floored natmandir or prayer hall. This prayer hall is only one of the temple's distinctive features: architecturally, the temple is designed to represent many religions—Hindu, Moslem, Christian, Buddhist—symbolizing thereby the varied religious experiences of the great modern saint of India, Sri Ramakrishna.

Closer to the river and facing the compound are the temples of Sri Ramakrishna's best-known and most beloved disciples, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda.

The temple of Vivekananda is two-storied; the first story containing a marble statue of him in yoga posture, and the second story, very elegant and very simple, the holy word Om (the Absolute) in Sanskrit, singularly appropriate because of Vivekananda's emphasis on Advaita, or nondualistic, Vedanta. This temple is visited with deep reverence by Western devotees who remember that he gave to the West four of his most productive years. The principal dome of this temple is topped by the trident, a symbol of Shiva, supreme god of yoga. It will be recollected that Ramakrishna had a vision of Vivekananda as a rishi—an eternal yogi—long before Vivekananda became Ramakrishna's disciple.

The temple of Swami Brahmananda is one-storied so far as public worship is concerned, its domes topped by the discus of Vishnu. Brahmananda is the eternal companion of Lord Krishna, as Ramakrishna saw also in vision and as Brahmananda himself realized. And since Krishna is the most beloved incarnation of Vishnu, and Brahmananda is to his disciples love personified, the discus of Vishnu is also singularly appropriate.

In between the temples of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda is the temple of the Holy Mother, Sri Ramakrishna's wife. This temple faces the Ganges and is the most frequented of the three; it is second only to the temple of Sri Ramakrishna in popularity. It is a simple shrine, easily approachable, like the Holy Mother herself. Used in both the Durga and Kali pujas (religious festivals), it may face the Ganges because the river also is worshiped as Mother, as my bearer informs me. Or it may face the Ganges because in both pujas—Durga and Kali—the Divine Mother, the Great Goddess, is worshiped. Her image is then immersed in the river, having first said farewell to her human prototype, the Holy Mother.

The Belur Math compound is large, and the many buildings are set well apart. The whole is spacious, serene, and uplifting. In addition to the temples, there are offices, monks' quarters, and a guesthouse. The swamis in gerua (ocher robes) and with black umbrellas walk to and fro as duty dictates and spirit wills. Those who are in charge sit in their offices (plain, bare rooms which often serve also as their bedrooms) consulting, talking, and writing.

**THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION**, Belur Math, is the headquarters for the vast organization of the Ramakrishna Order with its branches all over the world, principally, however, as is natural, in India. And yet, although the business—poor word, "business," for a purely philanthropic and spiritual activity—involves many millions of dollars, the swamis who do the administering are always available to the least, most unimportant "pilgrim."

I was met on my arrival at the Dum Dum Airport, for instance, by Swami Dayananda. He is the head of one of the

best, most modern hospitals in Calcutta. Over 50 per cent of its cases are charity; the cases which are not free pay for the free; and the reputation of the Ramakrishna Order being what it is, the list of waiting pay-patients is long. Swami Dayananda is obviously a busy sadhu, but because I had known him when he was in San Francisco some twenty-five years previously, he met me, drove me to Belur Math, and sent out an unused hospital bed for me to sleep on: Hindu beds are too hard for us soft Americans!

The second day after my arrival I was taken by Bharat Maharaj (Swami Abhayananda) to meet the President of this great organization, Swami Sankarananda. This is somewhat comparable to having an audience with the Pope; and anyone who has had an audience with the Pope will remember the many formalities, instructions, and antechambers. He will also remember kissing the Pope's ring and receiving his blessing as he stands in line.

At Belur Math a gong is rung to signify when Swami Sankarananda is free. The only instructions I received were at Belur Math to talk little—Swami Sankarananda had been very sick—and at home before I left the United States, to take the dust of the President's feet. Being tall, wearing glasses, and not being used to taking the dust of swamis' feet, I was told that I need not take the dust of any sadhus' feet except the President's. In advance of my "audience" at Belur Math, I had taken the dust of my dear Swami Madhavananda's feet to make sure that I should not lose my glasses—this was a real hazard because of perspiration in the humid, early October weather of Calcutta—; or my balance—another danger for one so tall.

Incidentally, Swami Madhavananda is the General Secretary of the Mission and Math, a position carrying heavy responsibility. He is third in command, as it were: the Presi-

dent, Swami Sankarananda, and the Vice-President, Swami Vishuddhananda, only preceding him. I had known and admired Swami Madhavananda too in San Francisco years before and had recently corresponded with him extensively.

Lovable Bharat Maharaj presented me to the President. I put my hands together in front of my forehead and stooped to take the dust of his feet. When down, I discovered to my consternation that there were no feet from which to take the dust. There were two flower-filled shoes but no feet. What was the matter? What to do? This was a contingency that I had not anticipated. And I could not, of course, fumble around on the floor for any length of time. I came up, touched my forehead, and mumbled something about the great honor. . . . President Maharaj immediately asked me about Swami Prabhavananda and Hollywood. In answering, I was greatly relieved to notice that, like so many Hindus, he was sitting in yoga posture, his legs crossed, and his feet perfectly natural and healthy-looking up on his chair.

ONE OF MANY experiences to show the practical and thoughtful kindness of the swamis in spite of heavy regular duties: All the weather since I had left San Francisco on September 2 had been "unusual"—that is, hot. Portland was hot, Seattle hot, Japan hot. Hong Kong was hot until the typhoon; Singapore was hot; Bangkok was hot, and there, as is evidently common, I had the "Bangkok bellyache," a very unpleasant illness akin to food poisoning. Rangoon was hot. When I landed at Calcutta, it too was "unusually" hot. From over a month of unaccustomed heat, from the suppressed excitement of really being in India, from losing my appetite, from perhaps not having fully recovered from the "Bangkok bellyache," I became sick.

Sujji Maharaj, Swami Nirvanananda, the Treasurer of this great organization, came to see me. "What's the matter?" he asked. On replying that I had a cold (that is what I thought I had), that I was too weak to go to the Temple (I should have remembered that colds do not make me weak), and that I was upset to cause him and others so much trouble, he answered, "Nothing; just another item; I shall send the doctor."

Being called an "item" by such a kindly, spirited Swami amused me so much that I began to improve then and there. And when the doctor came—a man who gives his services freely to the Mission—and diagnosed my case as simple loss of appetite, curable by a more varied diet—no more rice or bananas or forced eating—I began to perk up. The Durga Puja, which I shall shortly attempt to describe, followed almost immediately; and then we (another Western devotee and myself) decided to go to Darjeeling.

"Fine," said Sujji Maharaj, "stay for ten days." (Of course, I do not think that we decided to go at all as neither of us had planned to go to Darjeeling; I think the idea had been put into our heads.) No words can give an idea of the beauty of the Kanchenjunga and the other mountains of eternal snow seen at sunrise and sunset at Darjeeling. But while there I thought now and again of Indian food with uncertainty and wondered whether it were practical for me to continue on in India.

When we returned to Belur Math I noticed that the bearer, a nice young man of whom we had become fond, had, so we thought, a friend with him. For dinner, wonder of wonders, we had a good, Western-type meal. "I, cooker," the "friend" of the bearer identified himself. When I saw Sujji Maharaj and told him of this wonder, asking whence it came, he answered, "Guru Maharaj," meaning Sri Rama-

krishna. "I think firmly nothing is impossible to Guru Maharaj if he wish." Well, Guru Maharaj via Sujji Maharaj, and I am still in India thanks to an important swami who gives thought to his smallest "items" and has great faith.

I was happy and relieved to have a "cooker." I made my going to Benares, New Delhi, Kankhal, Agra, Vrindaban contingent upon the retention of the "cooker." Consulting with Swami Yatiswarananda, who had now come to Belur Math for the Monks' Conference and who was the other Westerner's guru, I asked if he thought the "cooker" could be retained. His eyes widened appreciatively, or did they because of puzzlement and/or amusement? Anyway, he asked why I called the cook a "cooker." "Because," said I, "he said he was a cooker." Thereupon, Swami Yatiswarananda laughed. I had made the same mistake as the cook himself, assuming that because in Indian the man who acts as a combined houseboy, maid, and messenger is called a "bearer," a cook in India is called a "cooker."

There is very little begging at Belur Math. It is not that the Ramakrishna Mission does not concern itself with the poor; indeed, that is one of its main reasons for existence. One day while waiting to use one of the two telephones with which this large institution manages to do business, I happened to glance at some files. They read something like this: DESTITUTE; POOR FAMILIES; POOR STUDENTS; EMERGENCY FUND FOR POOR. And I have seen the supplicants come and receive money, make their mark (thumbprint) in evidence that they have received so many rupees, and then again take the dust of the swami's feet who dispenses.

IN ADDITION to the monks in gerua walking to and fro on the compound, there are the brahmacharis (those who have

taken their first vows of renunciation) in white robes. There are also the bearers, usually dressed in white dhoti (the native Bengali dress for men); the sweepers; the temple guards; and the visitors.

The sweepers literally sweep. At Belur Math, sweeping is a major job. Every day the whole compound is swept; leaves are raked; lavatories cleaned; some, not all, of the cow dung picked up—some is left for fertilizer. The sweepers, like the bearers, wear the dhoti; but over the dhoti they wear what is called a napkin. This is a colored cloth, draped like a short skirt.

The temple guards are dressed in smart brown khaki uniforms: they see that nothing unseemly goes on either in the temples or on the compound. They are slight young men, mostly Gurkhas. I hope that my reader has the same romantic associations with the name Gurkha that I have. The Gurkhas are the loyal, dependable North India and Nepal hill people so relied on by the British during their occupation. Gurkhas are famous for their unquestioning bravery and for their fidelity to the person or cause they are serving. On the temple compound the guards are usually obeyed, whether because of their reputation or because the Hindus are naturally law-abiding.

Then, of course, there are visitors—they are often referred to as "bhaktas" or devotees.

The Belur Math compound is open to the public from 6:30 A.M. to 12:00 noon and from 3:30 P.M. to 6:30 P.M. from October to March; and from April to September from 5:30 A.M. to noon and from 4:00 P.M. to 7:30 P.M. On special occasions such as puja days, the time is extended. The people come to bathe in the Ganges at the Belur ghat (the broad steps leading down into the river); to pay homage to Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, Vivekananda, and Brah-

mananda; to enjoy the peaceful serenity and spiritual uplift the compound affords; to take the dust of the swamis' feet, and to pass a few words with the swamis. The largest number come for arati, or evening prayers.

The people, on the whole, are cleanly but not elaborately dressed. Some Indian men's clothes in winter are a delight to the American. He sees in them what he imagines are ancient Greek and Biblical costumes—and there but for a matter of a few centuries go Socrates and Plato, Joseph and his brethren. Gracefully draped yardage covers the body wholly or uncovers it, mostly depending on the weather, the dust, the mosquitoes. Six yards can cover a man entirely and with a natural elegance no Western garb can achieve. The variations seem endless: I have seen one yard, maybe twenty-seven inches wide, serve as head covering protecting from the sun, again for warmth on the shoulders, and again as a skirt-apron keeping the dhoti clean.

But the triumph of the Indian dress is the sari, worn by women. The sari is five or six yards of frequently hand-woven, brightly-colored cotton or silk, sometimes interwoven with gold or silver, and edged and ended by elaborate patterns. It is draped around the waist to form a skirt, and then over the shoulder to fall in a three-quarter-length drape or over both shoulders and perhaps also over the head to fall half-way down. The pattern on the sari's edge and end, plus the draping, usually give the sari its elegance.

As THE time for evening prayer approaches and the people gather, the coloring of the temple compound becomes gay as a result of the clothes; and a faster rhythm displaces the day's slow, pastoral calm. Arati in the great natmandir of Ramakrishna's temple is impressive. An organ, Indian drums,

a harmonium, conch shells, gongs, and the monks' chanting accompany the stately ritual before the marble figure of the Master. Arati starts with the continuous ringing of a bell. Lights are waved, then fire (burning camphor); holy Ganges water is offered, and flowers. Arati ends with the great sweeps of the lovely large fan. The swami who has performed the ritual with such rhythmic power prostrates full length before the figure which has now come to life in the hearts of the devotees, who in turn bow their heads reverentially. (The point of the ritual is to cleanse not only the swami performing but also the congregation, and by cleansing to uncover the Divinity within and without.)

When arati ends, all, except some who remain for meditation, leave the temple. They must then recover their shoes. Here there is an impasse. For the congregation of three or four hundred people on a Sunday night, there is one young man to handle all the shoes. Two guards watch from the high temple veranda to see that the process is orderly. It takes a long time. To keep a pressing engagement would be impossible unless bare feet were *comme il faut*, and the loss of shoes inconsequential. "This is India," as Swami Dayananda said after showing me his beautiful and very up-to-date Calcutta hospital and then pointing out across the street: Indian slums with pigs, people, dogs, and cows all living in close proximity.

ANOTHER study in contrast is the colorful brilliance, controlled gaiety, music and pomp of the pujas compared to the somber and drab homes and surroundings of so many of the congregation. I arrived in time for the Durga Puja, probably the most important religious festival in Bengal. Durga, who is ten-armed, symbolizing her great power, is one name for

the Divine Mother, the wife of the all-powerful Shiva. Their home is on Mt. Kailas, a mountain both real and mythical in the Himalayas.

Durga's parental home is on earth, and once a year, for three days, she visits her parents. During this time she blesses the good and destroys the evil. She brings with her her two daughters, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and beauty, and Saraswati, the goddess of art and learning; and her two sons, Kartika, the god of righteous war, and Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of success and prosperity. Durga comes riding a great lion, one of her powerful arms killing the demon of darkness. The gods watch from above with delight this yearly destruction of evil on earth. When evil is destroyed and the good have been blessed, Durga returns to her heavenly home on her mount with her four heavenly children, her earthly children having been cleansed.

For days before the puja proper, workmen and artists were busy in the Belur Math main temple building the images. While the figures were being built, there was not the slightest gesture which would indicate that they were any more than that—just images. The curious, and I was among them, watched the artists as they painted the demon a harsh, dark green and the lion orange. Durga was given a rich gown and a glittering silver halo. I do not remember the color of Lakshmi and Saraswati, but I do remember that the grouping glistened and sparkled as huge electric lights were focused on it.

The puja starts with supplication by way of rolling drums and monks' chanting. Circumambulating the temple compound, the procession carries what seems to be a plantain tree draped in red and white cloth. The marchers wake up the slothful to the business at hand: petitioning Durga to come to earth. On the temple compound, a tree house has

been built of bamboo, festooned with brightly colored cloth, on one side of the house a bamboo ladder. In the house is a Hindu orchestra playing religious music, also soliciting the Great Mother.

More and more people gather, very well dressed, partly because this is the season for buying new clothes, giving gifts, paying up debts, forgiving one's enemies: it is New Year's and Christmas combined. Not only at Belur Math but also all over Bengal, in public places and in private homes, is the image being made and supplication going on. The whole is lighted, both literally and metaphorically, in expectation of the goddess' arrival.

At Belur Math the supplication reaches its height after arati. Now in place of one, three swamis perform, and the organ is displaced by wholly Indian instruments whose playing is increasingly loud and exciting. But above the music can be heard the chanting. According to a Hindu devotee sitting on the floor next to me, the chants go something like this: "We are your little children and we do not know how to pray. Teach us how to pray, for you must come to your father's house for three days in order to drive away evil and to bless the good."

And there is nothing mechanical in the chanting; it is real pleading. The swamis, who are men managing huge organizations, are the ones performing the ritual and doing the pleading. They are not ignorant and superstitious, but well educated and seasoned by life.

The point is that they want to arouse the Durga in themselves and thereby in the congregation; they want to destroy the evil in themselves (if, of course, there is any evil in swamis!) and thereby in the congregation; to feel the goddess' blessing; even to be able to worship the evil as one side of the blessed whole. The congregation follows the ceremony

with all its heart and mind, so that tomorrow at 4:30 A.M. when the ritual resumes, the Durga image will be alive—alive in the heart and mind of each supplicant as well as in the temple. And from then on, the image is more than an image; it is the living goddess. Durga has arrived.

The final ritual is, perhaps, not considered so sacred as the preceding, but from a Westerner's point of view it is the more dramatic. The large compound is crowded almost to capacity for Durga's immersion in the holy Ganga.

That evening following arati we were placed at vantage points so that we could see the final path of the goddess. Hurrying us out of the temple by a side entrance before the ceremony in the temple had been completed, our guide placed us on the front veranda just off of the broad temple steps. In no time at all it was evident why we were so placed: out of the entrance came first the drummers, dancing as they drummed; then musicians carrying vina, conch shell, gongs; then the swamis and brahmacharis who were performing the ritual; and finally the goddess herself, carried by stalwart men and illumined by blinding lights.

The goddess was carried down the stairs and then turned around to face the temple. In front of her danced the drummers and, I believe, some of the brahmacharis, swamis, and members of the congregation. Dazzling and glittering, she stood in triumph, a conquering figure surrounded by her children. In this way, the crowd who could not get into the temple had an opportunity to see her before she was brought to face the Holy Mother, preceding her immersion. When she reached the Holy Mother's temple, a pathway was cleared between her and the picture of the Holy Mother.

Immediately in front of the goddess was performed a dance, the like of which I have never seen. Two young men

who were carrying the large burners of incense whirled until the light of the incense became a circle. As the lighted pieces fell from the burners they put out the embers with their bare dancing feet. They placed the receptacles on their chins and continued the dance with the vessels balanced, their arms and feet becoming multiplied by the rapidity of their movements. All the while clouds of incense added mystery to the goddess and a lovely odor to the atmosphere. As this dance was going on, people were shouting, "Jai (victory) Durga," and conducting private dances of their own, clapping their hands and moving their heads.

When the goddess began to move down the steps to the river, the religious excitement was at high pitch; and when she was finally immersed, a shout came from the crowd.

We were then hustled back into the temple so that we had a seat (on the floor, of course) right next to the swamis where the main sprinkling of holy Ganges water would occur.

Well, I have never been to a Durga Puja before, so I cannot say whether the feeling of love and uplift generated is repeated year after year. Judging by the joyous people, I should say that it was. "If my mortal enemy came to me at this time, I would have to embrace him," one of our dear Hindu friends told us. Knowing the man's sincerity, I do not doubt his statement. I certainly was in an unusually loving mood; I can only attribute it to the Durga Puja.

**AFTER** Darjeeling I went to Benares and New Delhi, seeing and admiring the work of the Ramakrishna Mission in both places. Having been so happy all through India, I did not believe that I could be any happier. Then came Kankhal, north of Delhi at the foot of the Himalayas. I had not known a thing about Kankhal. Swami Madhavananda, who

had planned my itinerary, had simply said something about seeing the Himalayas and meeting Swami Atulananda, a Dutch-American who had, years before, become a Ramakrishna swami. As a child in California I had known him as Gurudas.

We left Delhi by car—a chauffeur-driven old Austin—bundled up for Alaska weather and carrying box lunches from the Ashoka Hotel. Life was just beginning to start up in Delhi: loaded camels were coming in from the country; herds of goats and sheep were being hurried along; an occasional truck or auto sounded its horn; there were men muffled up with only their eyes showing, presumably walking to work and obviously cold.

Suddenly in front of us were the snow-covered Himalayas, in front of them their so-called foothills—to us another range of high mountains—and beside us, running parallel with the road, the Ganga. This was not the muddy river of Calcutta or Benares, but a clear, cool, mountain current rushing down. (Actually, it is the Ganges Canal built in 1842-54 and extending from Hardwar to Kanpur.) For miles we drove beside it, seeing the mountains of perpetual snow in the distance.

As we began to thaw out, we thought of our lunch. Reaching for it, we were warned by our Indian companion: "You cannot eat meat in Kankhal, Hardwar, or Rishikesh." We had not yet arrived, so we ate some of our chicken sandwiches, leaving the remainder for our return trip in the late afternoon.

At about 10:30 A.M. we arrived at the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Kankhal. The sweet, kindly swami in charge welcomed us. He had received the New Delhi swami's telegraph telling of our arrival just fifteen minutes before; so he had had very little time to have the guestroom made

ready. Moreover, there were three of us, whereas the telegraph had only mentioned two. But this swami is the managing head of a hospital which treated 86,967 patients in 1956-7; so what were three unexpected guests? The hospital he manages, like the hospital in Benares, is located in one of the seven sacred cities of India. The Foreword of the Fifty-Seventh Annual Report of the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Kankhal, Hardwar, says:

In his wanderings, Swami Vivekananda had come in contact with the suffering and helplessness of the ailing monks living in Hardwar and nearby places. One day he told Swami Kalyanananda, one of his disciples, "My boy, can you do something for the ailing monks at Hardwar and Rishikesh? There is none to look after them when they fall ill. Go and serve them." The disciple readily agreed. In June, 1901, he began his work at Kankhal. Two rooms, hired at a monthly rent of three rupees, served as his dispensary, indoor ward, bedroom and office. His stock of medicines was contained in a small box. Living on alms, the Swami distributed medicines not only among those who came to him but also among those others who could not stir out of their huts. This was how this Sevashrama came into being.

The respect the Order commands is much more than simple respect; it verges on awe. Quite by chance and involuntarily this was brought out when I was in Rangoon. There I had gone to see the new wing of the Ramakrishna hospital (recently dedicated, and opened by the President of Burma), and had been given some flowers by a devotee. When I returned to my hotel, I asked my bearer to get a vase for me and, by way of conversation, said that I had seen the new wing of the Ramakrishna Hospital. The bearer looked

at me with interest and spoke with intensity: "Go to Ramakrishna Hospital, live. Go to Government Hospital, die."

The case is probably not so clear-cut, nor is the "government hospital" always the culprit. But the swamis look at their patients, students, and poor as God; they look on themselves as dedicated. For this God, the God in humanity, they have renounced the world. The power in their attitude is conveyed, for the Ramakrishna hospitals have a remarkable record of cures.

That faith plays a major role in their record of cures cannot be gainsaid. At Vrindaban, for instance, where Sri Krishna once played his flute and sported with the gopis, there is a Ramakrishna hospital. It serves the poor and illiterate people over a radius of fifty miles. The people who trudge to the hospital do not even know its name or the names of the swamis. To them, the hospital and the swamis are "Kala Babu," the name of the owner of the house where hospital services were first offered by the Ramakrishna Order in 1907. The sweet swami who showed us around Vrindaban was greeted with loving affection by the townsfolk and trustful supplication by the poor waiting at the hospital gate to see their sick relatives.

Like the hospitals at Benares and Kankhal, Vrindaban serves many pilgrims who, coming to the holy city to worship, fall sick and have no money or relatives to care for them. There is, I understand, a government hospital at Vrindaban; but the people prefer "Kala Babu," and many given up as incurable by the government hospital will in complete confidence present themselves at "Kala Babu" where they are frequently healed. Here Christ's "Thy faith hath made thee whole" is daily demonstrated. And Walt Whitman's observation that invisible currents of sympathy are better for the sick than medicine is again verified.

After washing up at Kankhal, we went to see Swami Atulananda. "Western ladies!" he greeted us as we took the dust of his feet. This was Gurudas of my childhood, now a Ramakrishna swami in gerua talking about "our" Order. But it did not seem at all strange to me, perhaps because so many years dropped off as I sat there. We all talked together; I can only remember his saying something to the effect that India is still perilous healthwise for Westerners; that the world is becoming increasingly small; that, yes, he remembered Ujjvala (Ida Ansell), Mrs. French (a distant cousin of mine who had been in India some thirty years before), and Swami "Trigunatit." Thinking how well Gurudas looked and how clear and keen his mind was, I was rather surprised when the swami in charge at Kankhal told us that Swami Atulananda was close to ninety.

We ate the vegetarian lunch that the Sevashrama served us, and then started out for Rishikesh with Brahmachari Seta. How is an earthly paradise described? And why should I think Rishikesh a paradise now when I did not while there? The road from Hardwar (Kankhal is really a part of Hardwar) to Rishikesh is through jungle. A jungle is not very different from a forest except that the underbrush is tangled thicker and, of course, the vegetation is tropical. And in a jungle are tigers, snakes, monkeys, parrots, spiders.

Brahmachari Seta, who speaks English very well, told us about the work of the hospital when we said that we were sorry to take him away from it. A few years ago two patients had been brought in suffering from tiger wounds. Tigers become man-eaters when they are no longer strong enough to bait their natural prey, or when weakened by gunshot wounds.

As we approached Rishikesh, we again saw the snow-covered Himalayas. After passing through the town proper,

we parked the car and walked toward the Ganges. On the way we saw only one holy man in his little hut. It was siesta time, about 1:30 P.M., and the other huts were all closed. This holy man appeared to have put a gray powder on his body; he had, I think, only a loin cloth on—we came on him so abruptly and so closely that it seemed impolite to stare although he was utterly oblivious to us. He had marks of Shiva on his forehead. There he was, immobile, sitting in yogi posture.

The situation of Rishikesh is one of the most beautiful that I have ever seen. The Ganges comes rushing, bending, and gushing between two heavily-wooded, sloping hills. On the path that we took leading to a bridge from which can be seen one of the most magnificent bends in the river were begging lepers—horrible, yet not horrible enough to destroy the power of the beautiful. It was as though the Ganges said, "Do everything you can—place beside me the most horrible of horrors—my beauty will overcome and endure." In the distance could be seen the couch of snow from which the Ganga arose, and on the river's side, retreats, so Brahmachari Seta told us, for the sadhus.

When we returned to our car about 2:30 P.M., our Sikh chauffeur was having trouble getting it started. The distance from Rishikesh to Hardwar is only fourteen miles, but it took us two and a half hours to make the trip. The car would start and then stop, eventually to stop altogether in the middle of the jungle. This did not seem alarming to me until I realized that in the jungle there is no American Automobile Association. The chauffeur worked away at the car with a worried look on his face, and Brahmachari Seta tried to flag down some passing cars while telling us that he was from Coorg where everyone is allowed to carry a gun. "I shot my first tiger," said he, "when I was fourteen."

"Well," thought I to myself, "if we have such an adept in tiger shooting with us, there is no cause to be anxious." Thereupon I got out of the car and peered into the jungle, never considering that Brahmachari Seta had no gun. Any-way, there was nothing much to see—an occasional parrot or monkey. The road itself was more interesting because on it would pass donkeys with bells on; colorfully clad women with huge silver bracelets on their ankles, and wide, full skirts; bullock-drawn carts with drivers muffled up in what I thought until now Arabian or Egyptian garb.

As the day drew toward sunset and darkness—there is next to no twilight in India—Brahmachari Seta decided to put us in a public carrier (bus) to Hardwar and to remain himself with the chauffeur, hoping that eventually some car would stop and render assistance. Just as he so decided, a bus loaded with people did stop, and the bus driver with his helpers threw down some not very strong looking rope. We were towed for about three quarters of a mile when, of course, the rope broke. But the bus driver promised that he would return, and five minutes before darkness set in he did. This time he had a strong, dependable rope; we got into his lumbering empty bus and were taken first to the bus depot repair shop where the little old Austin was dropped off with our chauffeur, and second to the Ramakrishna Sevashrama.

The knights of the road in India are, we judge, the bus drivers. They are also the taxis in Hardwar-Kankhal, because the bus waited as we washed up and then drove us within rickshaw-riding distance of the Brahma-kund, or pool of Brahma. Actually, this is the Ganges which is divided into two cool currents flowing on each side of a great brick ghat, a part of the Ganges Canal.

We arrived at the Brahma-kund too late for evening prayers (the Ganges is worshiped here); but the beauty of the

spot may have been enhanced by the relative quietness. On the great brick surface between the two arms of the Ganga were holy men singing, others reading from, maybe, the Bhagavad-Gita to small groups of people, men hawking tea and biscuits, beggars. The moon was almost full, so its play on the waters and on our spirits may have accounted in part for the peace we felt.

But the peace we felt may also have come from simple release. We could not drive back to Delhi that night; there was no longer any sense of urgency. Next morning we left at 6:00 A.M., having said, "Namaste—until we meet again," to the dear, motherly swami in charge. On Sunday we heard two fine lectures by the Delhi swami; on Monday drove to Agra, on Tuesday to Vrindaban—lovely Vrindaban which turned out to be another experience in contentment—then back to Delhi and finally Belur Math.

SINCE the weather had become much cooler, we went to Jayrambati and Kamarpukur, by way of Bishnupur. This was our first train trip in India, and was not half so bad as anticipated. The directions of the swami who took us to Howrah Station, the large train terminal for Calcutta, were very explicit: "Lock yourselves in and do not under any circumstances open the door until you arrive at Bishnupur." (There is no connection between compartments in Indian trains; each compartment is a separate unit opening directly outside, with attached lavatory, washbasin, and sometimes shower. The seats, which are lengthwise, have springs, and on them is placed the bed-roll which each person must provide for himself. I had, thank goodness, an air-mattress and a sleeping bag.

At 2:30 A.M. the train stopped. Judging the station to be Bishnupur, we peered out, to see Swami Prabhavananda's

brother, Mr. Gokul Ghosh, waiting on the platform. He took us to the guestroom of a small ashrama where about thirty-four young men are living according to the ideals of Swami Vivekananda, and where there is a temple to Sri Ramakrishna. This ashrama and temple are not yet parts of the Ramakrishna Order, but it is hoped that they will be someday. (Incidentally, this is how many of the centers started. The well-known Ramakrishna Mission Sister Nivedita Girls' School and Sarada Mandir, Calcutta, was started in 1898; but it was not made a branch of the Mission until 1918.)

I have mentioned hospitals so often that I have rather neglected the great educational (cultural, sociological, and technical) work of the Math and Mission. This is perhaps a good place to say something more of the educational work of the Mission because not far from Bishnupur is the village birthplace of Swami Prabhavananda, where another temple to Sri Ramakrishna has been erected by students of Swami Prabhavananda and where there is a small dispensary. (Neither of these is yet attached to the Ramakrishna Mission.)

The Indian village—the heart of India—has often been described. Only by seeing it can the ordinary American understand what is meant by poverty. This village of Surmanagar was obviously on no tourist route nor was it worse, I understand, than thousands of others; in fact, it was better by reason of the temple and dispensary. All the homes were huts made of mud with thatched roofs; dust was everywhere; clothes were negligible. But the doctor who was giving his services freely told us that the most frequent ailment was malnutrition and the most frequent cure was through faith.

Prime Minister Nehru is well aware of the conditions in the villages and is allotting many lakhs to proved organizations to train village workers. The Ramakrishna Order is one to which hundreds of thousands of rupees are going.

There is, for instance, just off the compound at Belur, the Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Pitha. This institution was started in 1941 and is divided into a wholly residential intermediate college affiliated with Calcutta University; a technical school; a school of adult social education; a school of religious instruction; and a graduate school for training young men to work with the villagers. Many of its professors are Hindus trained in social service work in the United States, but the management is wholly in the hands of the Ramakrishna Order, and as a consequence the religious attitude of the Order—seeing God in man—is inculcated.

Going into the villages from the Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Pitha is a mobile audio-visual unit propagating hygiene and general education, with a mobile library. This department further organized a number of centers for distributing free milk and food packages to the destitute. This is only one of eighty-seven centers in India, so the amount of help the Ramakrishna Order gives the villages can hardly be over estimated.

Another type of work which the Ramakrishna Order does and which impressed me was its care of orphans. About twelve miles out of Calcutta at Rahara is the Ramakrishna Mission Boys Home.

It came into existence thirteen years back when the devastating famine of 1942-43 carried away millions of inhabitants of Bengal and left behind a host of orphans and destitutes roaming helplessly on the pavements of big towns in quest of food and shelter. The streets of Calcutta were strewn with the dead and dying in the terrible months of the latter half of 1943. Being moved by this national calamity, the authorities of the Ramakrishna Mission came forward to ameliorate in their humble way this distressing situation in collaboration with the Government and the

public by taking care of some of these helpless children. They started this BOYS' HOME in September, 1944, with 37 orphan boys on its rolls with a gift from the late Satish Chandra Mukherjee.

Starting with thirty-seven the home now has close to four hundred in residence; it admits "a number of day scholars . . . and gives opportunity to some of its old students for higher studies in colleges." It also has a library which not only serves the Home but also general readers in the community and a separate mobile section with a van which services forty-three rural libraries registered under it.

This quick growth is not only a result of the constant need in India but more particularly in Bengal where tragedy after tragedy fell in rapid succession. Having supplied patriots way out of proportion to her population in the struggle for independence, Bengal was visited by the devastating famine in 1942-43, by a blood bath in 1947 on the occasion of partition, and thereafter by the arrival of millions of refugees.

The Home is a brilliant success, whether it is viewed by oriental or occidental eyes. The occidental sees the numbers, the practicality of the teaching—all the boys are trained to earn a living—the democracy—there is equality of opportunity. The occidental sees the Ramakrishna Mission Boys' Home as an organizational success. The oriental does too, but for slightly different reasons. The oriental notices that it is a "Home," not an orphanage, that many of its supporters are its own graduates, that some of its graduates have become brahmacharis and are, of course, leading dedicated lives at the Home, their Home.

The swami who brought the Home into existence I did not meet because I visited the school on a holiday, and he had taken some of the boys on an excursion to see the Botanical

Garden, Howrah. But I have a photograph of him before me with his arm around one of his boys. The photograph is in the pamphlet report of the Home. There are three other men in the picture beside the swami, but the swami stands out: he is the mother, father, friend, bulwark of the innocent children whose paths in life but for him would be tragic in the extreme.

This Home, like so many of the other organizations of the Order, was started by private donation; it is now supported by the Indian Government with, of course, private donations still important in its functioning.

BUT THE WHOLE owes its existence to Sri Ramakrishna, whose birthplace we visited. Kamarpukur is an Indian village with huts of mud, with thatched roofs. Because the Ramakrishna Order is there, Kamarpukur does not seem so desolate as other villages. The tank by the side of the temple is lovely to look at, with flowers and trees surrounding it, and, I imagine, free from malaria-breeding mosquitoes. There are also three schools, a dispensary, and a library conducted by the Order.

There is the Shiva temple wherein Sri Ramakrishna's mother had a vision that she would bear a divine child, the tree under which Ramakrishna was first acknowledged an avatar, and the temple erected in his and his godmother's honor. His godmother was, by his insistence, a woman of the shudra, or fourth, caste whom he loved; so this temple shows how early Ramakrishna repudiated caste.

As we were resting in the guesthouse on the temple compound, we heard drums and bagpipes coming nearer and nearer. Not wanting to miss anything, we ran out to see a wedding procession approaching the temple. A gorgeously

dressed bride and groom were stepping out of palanquins, followed by villagers making up their wedding procession. These wedding guests, in contrast to the bridal couple, were drably dressed.

And then I saw the gerua-clad swami bringing into these people's lives some modicum of health through dispensaries, of education through schools, or religion through the swamis' daily lives and the happiness their being radiates. How anyone would prefer another color or richer apparel than the gerua is difficult to understand. For is it not the richest and most colorful dress? Is not the silver and gold thread running through the sari cheap in comparison? The freshly starched, the immaculate dhoti of the wealthy has not the purity of the gerua. The drab cloth of the poor is no less humble than the gerua, which goes among the lowest of the low.

But from the gerua's point of view, there are no such contrasts. For it, the problem of opposites does not exist: "Pity no more would be if all were as happy as we." If the millennium should come, and the poor, the uneducated, the sick ceased to be; if then compassion, pity, mercy were unnecessary, the swamis would not be different from what they now are, for to them there are ultimately no distinctions: all is spirit.

They have never had the audacity to look at man with mercy: "Who can show mercy to Him? No *mercy*, but *service* by looking upon man as God" is their ideal and practice. That another face of Shiva should be uncovered, that dear Sudhir Maharaj who manages, among other things, the guesthouse and calls me "Mother Dorothy" and asks me, "Can I go now?" should suddenly be serving something more worthy of his labor would not disturb his or any swami's equanimity. For as one said to me quite casually at Belur Math: "From bliss we come; in bliss we live; into bliss we shall return."

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# UNIVERSAL IMPERATIVES OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

SWAMI BUDHANANDA

THE Bhagavad-Gita is one of the most popular scriptures known to man. It has been translated into almost all the literary languages of the world. The immense popularity of this ancient scripture in the modern world is indeed a wonder.

Two reasons may be pointed out to explain the Gita's popularity. First, Sri Krishna, who is worshiped by millions of Hindus as God incarnate, was himself the teacher of this gospel. In a certain place Sri Krishna himself said: "The Gita is my heart, Arjuna—my very essence." In other words, the Gita contains the essence of divine wisdom. Second, the Gita is a truly universal gospel. It is an ancient scripture; but its fundamental teachings, being eternal and universal, have perfect relevancy for our times, and for our lives—individually, personally.

Anyone daily practicing a few teachings of the Gita will experience beneficial effects. He will be a better human being every succeeding day. He will overcome his difficulties more easily than others. He will discover an unending source of inspiration for his whole life. He will grow in strength, wisdom, inner stability, in one word—spirituality.

IN EVERY great scripture of the world there are three types of teachings. First, there are narrations of eternal truths, universally applicable, such as: "Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood." "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." A second type of teaching concerns the *ought*—what should be done and what should not be done, such as: "Whatever you give to others, give with love and reverence. Do not offer gifts with disdain in your heart. Gifts must be given in abundance, with joy, humility and compassion." In the third type of teachings there are the direct imperatives from the Lord: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Equally,

Give me your whole heart,  
Love and adore me,  
Worship me always,  
Bow to me only,  
And you shall find me:

In the Bhagavad-Gita—which is one of the most comprehensive of all world scriptures—are to be found these three types of teachings. But of all the teachings in the Gita, the most important, significant, and helpful are those teachings of the Lord through which, with all his authority, wisdom, omniscience, and understanding, he directly commands us to do, or to refrain from doing, certain things. In such teachings the Lord speaks in powerful imperatives, sweeping aside all chance for argumentation on the part of the hearer. As such, the Lord uses imperatives not as a dictator, trying to exert his will, but as an omniscient benefactor, asking faltering man to do or not to do certain things, in order to help him toward his spiritual evolution and fulfillment.

Of the seven hundred verses in the Gita, in more than

sixty the Lord speaks in the imperative mood. Among those sixty-odd verses, in twenty-four the imperative mood is used to convey the Lord's direct commandments. In the remaining the imperative is used with conversational casualness, such as: "Listen, O Arjuna"; or 'Know this for certain.'

We intend here to study these twenty-four imperatives and understand their universal applicability in our lives.

THE FIRST imperative of Sri Krishna in the Gita occurs in the third verse of the second chapter:

**Do not yield to unmanliness, O Son of Pritha. It does not become you. Shake off this base faintheartedness and arise, O Scorching of Foes. (II, 3)**

This verse is charged with enormous redeeming power. Proper understanding of it can restore life to a person half-dead, and clarity to a man most deeply confused.

Under what circumstances did Sri Krishna thunder this rebuke to Arjuna? It came about in this way. Two related Indian royal families had declared war on each other. By deceitful means the Kauravas drove out the Pandavas from their lawfully inherited share of the kingdom. Friends and relatives sought a reasonable and amicable settlement. Sri Krishna, who was kin to both families, tried his best to bring about an honorable settlement. The Pandavas were reluctant to go to war. But when Duryodhana, the spokesman for the Kauravas, declared that not even that much of land as could stand on the point of a needle would be given to the Pandavas, war became the only means for settling the dispute.

In response to an appeal from each of the parties, all the rulers and fighting men of India allied themselves to one

or the other of the parties. Krishna gave his army to the Kauravas and himself became a non-fighting ally of the Pandavas. He undertook to drive the chariot of Arjuna, the great general of the Pandava army.

It should be remembered that Krishna was not an ordinary human being, but an avatar—an incarnation of God—playing his part on the world stage, at a critical time in Indian history.

On the eve of battle Arjuna went to view the two armies poised for fighting. He almost fainted at the prospect of relatives and friends killing each other. Shaken and nervous, Arjuna told Krishna that he could see no good coming out of the war. It would only multiply sin and suffering. Indeed, he would rather die at the enemy's hands than kill. Arjuna gave cogent arguments in regard to the evils that would be multiplied by the conflict.

Arjuna's plea against war no doubt contained some logic. But, clearly, he was confused as far as the principles of righteous conduct under a given set of circumstances were concerned. In a declared war, coming about after all attempts at honorable, amicable settlement have failed, the commander of an army has no business to be squeamish or faint-hearted. He has to fight and not philosophize. He has to shoot and not sob. Therefore Sri Krishna administered shock treatment to Arjuna with that rebuke. And it worked as nothing else would have.

Sheer weakness often masquerades as piety and deludes a man. Whatever he does under that delusion is wrong; and can produce evil results. Sri Krishna, therefore, shattered Arjuna's delusion with a sudden blow. And then he proceeded to teach him in regard to higher truths and their place in life for the fulfillment of life's high destiny.

Undoubtedly this first great imperative of the Gita had

a tremendous effect on Arjuna's life, as well as on the outcome of the Kurukshetra war, and on Indian civilization itself. More important, however, is the fact that this imperative has a very crucial and far-reaching significance for every single person in the world.

The Gita is called the *moksha-shastra*, or the scripture which shows you the way to attain liberation. But the Gita does not propose to take you out of the context of your own life in order to make you wise and free. It proposes to inform and transform your life in all its details without doing any violence to the roots of your own being. The Gita teaches you to meet every situation of your life—not someone else's life—in a way which will be conducive to your spiritual progress. This "you" is anybody, anywhere in the world, no matter what religion he professes or whether he professes any religion at all.

It is significant that the Gita was taught in a battlefield, for it is in the greatest crises that the ministrations of the highest wisdom are most urgently called for. This, however, is not always very well understood. If we act in a crisis in a blind manner, we are sure to get battered and shattered. It is not the physical suffering alone that will be our lot under such circumstances. We shall, so to say, also damage our soul. Whether you like it or not, life is indeed a battlefield. You have to wrest everything out of it by fighting.

Generally speaking, in life we may have two aspirations: *abhyudaya*, or worldly prosperity; and *nishreyasa*, or spiritual illumination. To attain worldly prosperity we have to fight with external nature and compete with our fellow human beings. To attain spiritual illumination we have to fight our inner nature, our lower propensities, and conquer them.

In any case, you are in a battlefield. You cannot escape this fact. You are required to fight bravely and withal dexter-

ously, if you intend to achieve your chosen ends. One who refuses to fight will not make any mark in life. For those who have not yet spiritually transcended the relativity of good and evil, fighting in the right manner with clean motive for a good cause is always good. Crisis after crisis, trial after tribulation, will come. You will have to stand firm and hold your ground in righteousness, before you can fight well and become victorious.

Those who get defeated in life are mostly victims of their own cherished and nourished weaknesses, doubts, indecisions, and cowardices. And these weaknesses have nowhere any root in the truth of your being. Therefore, the Lord's first imperative is directed towards strengthening man from within. Any help that a person is given without strengthening him from within is of little use, spiritually speaking. And after a person has been strengthened from within, it does not matter if no other help is given.

We will need to understand these truths about life. If you merely want to survive somehow in any situation of life, you will not survive at all. To be able even to survive, you must aspire to live. If you want just somehow to live, you will not live at all. To be able even to live, you must aspire to conquer. If you want just to conquer, you will not conquer at all. To conquer for all time you must aspire for that victory, which defeats none, but enlivens, ennobles, and enlightens everybody. And this can be done only by immolating the self totally for the happiness of the many, for the welfare of the many, in the manner of a Buddha, a Christ, or a Ramakrishna. In every sphere of life this is the law.

Do not curse yourself, or think lightly of yourself, for the Atman is all that you are. "That thou art." Be firm in this conviction. Throw out from your mind all ideas to the contrary. Do not curse the world, for it is God's. God is

here and now. God is in everything. God is everything. We may not have yet known it experientially. But nothing is truer than this. After realizing this fact, the sage of the Mundaka Upanishad exclaimed: "Yea, this is the best of the worlds; this is the best of the worlds." Indeed it is.

Thank the Lord, O moping man, O weeping man,  
Thank the Lord, O groping man, O thankless man,  
That the world is not other than what it is!  
Here Karma works: you can do and undo.  
Here mettle tells; good is valued.  
Here austerities bear fruit.  
Self-application is rewarded.  
Sincerity is understood, murder known.  
Here seeds sprout, flowers blossom, fruits ripen;  
You cannot escape here blessings of virtue and burnings of sin.  
Here the wheel comes full circle, without stopping anywhere.  
Here oppressor's head someday rolls on the ground.  
Deferred justice is referred to and applied.  
Here truth always triumphs, never falsehood.  
Here hatred never succeeds, love never fails.  
Here if you bring light darkness everywhere disappears.  
Here there is no dogmatism except in minds of perverted men.  
Here no doubt a sword-thrust brings forth flowing gush  
of warm red blood.  
Again, here wounds are healed,  
Tears are wiped, prayers are heard:  
Here, in God's world, you can die and be reborn.  
Here God is seen. Aye, God is verily seen!  
Here you can become liberated while living in this body.  
Where could you find, O foolish man, a better world than  
this world of cause and effect, of sowing and harvesting?  
Moreover, of grace?

Whom can you truly blame in this world, if you would at all, except yourself? Are you really failing, being defeated? Then know for certain it is not because the world is wicked,

but because you are weak. And you are weak not because you are really weak, but because you have not cared to tap and use your neglected strength.

Are you in a crisis? Are you in a difficult situation? Then the first thing for you to do is to hold on with all your might to this teaching of Sri Krishna: "Yield not to unmanliness." In these words of the Lord there is power to rejuvenate the whole world.

Why should you not yield to unmanliness? Simply because: It just does not become you. It is beneath your dignity—you, the Atman. It is beneath your dignity, because within you is *all* strength! You are the Atman, which fire cannot burn, sword cannot pierce, air cannot dry, water cannot drown: you are the immortal spirit, over whom even all-destroying death has no power. Nothing but this in you makes sense. Above all this is something we require to hear.

Weakness is that fictitious state of your being, is that self-falsification, which you find yourself to have when you become oblivious to your inalienable high connection with God; or when you forget that you are not just this much flesh and bone, but the Atman.

Therefore, in his first imperative, Sri Krishna builds the foundation, without which you can do nothing worthwhile in life, but on which you can build any superstructure.

First banish all weakness from within you. Swami Vivekananda says: "Know that all sins and all evil can be summed up in that one word—weakness. It is weakness that is motive power in all evil-doing." Therefore banish all weakness. Be a man. Be a woman, heart-whole, full stature. Then invade life and make out of it whatever you choose.

In the second line of the verse, the Lord says: "Shake off this faint-heartedness and arise, O Scorcher of Foes." When it does not become you to yield to weakness, what

should you do? You have only to shake it off as you would a creeping snake from your body. Fill your inside with courage and faith, and arise with firm determination to face up to whatever life may bring you. Face hard facts with harder determination. Remember, there is nothing in this universe more powerful than the spirit of man. Assert your might. Blast your problems with the power of your character, born of Atman-awareness. It is not external oppositions, problems, or temptations that destroy a person. But it is the subversion from within which functions in devious forms of rationalized, sanctified, and ritualized weakness.

No weakness of yours, however, can be afforded any moral sanction whatever. Weakness has nothing moral about it. It is the matrix of all immorality in the world. It has, in fact, no roots in you. It is just none of your business to be weak. You may have any number of faults. You may have committed any number of sins. Never mind. Only do not sin anymore. Strength is forever your birthright, for the Divine Mother is not your stepmother, but your very own mother, as Sri Ramakrishna says.

Being fed by negative thoughts all the time, we have either become weak or wicked. Let us throw them off, as the Lord says, and arise out of somnambulism, and awake out of stupor. Dehypnotize yourself. It is indeed very important to have shaken off unmanliness, given up faint-heartedness, and arisen.

**BUT NOW**, practically speaking, after awakening what are you going to do with yourself? This awakened self will now have to be trained in a special way, for the fulfillment of your great destiny. In his subsequent imperatives Sri Krishna clearly points out how this is to be done. He says:

**That by which all this is pervaded, that know for certain to be indestructible. None can cause destruction of what is Immutable. (II, 17)**

This is the beginning of the training of the awakened self. The awakened self must stay aware of its imperishability.

When you are aware, even theoretically, that you are the indestructible spirit, you function in one way. Should you consider yourself otherwise, you function in a different way. You are either a lion or a jackal. In fact, without being aware of one's imperishability, one can never have a spiritually sound and rewarding perspective of life. All other views of life fall short of the highest truth about yourself; hence are unsound.

With this right perspective born of your awareness of the imperishability of your soul, what are you expected to do? The Lord says:

**Being established in yoga, perform your actions, casting off attachment and remaining even-minded both in success and failure. This evenness is called yoga. (II, 48)**

To the imperishable that you essentially are, success cannot add anything; for the same reason, failure cannot take away anything from you. When you stay aware of this fact, the mind will develop a propensity for evenness, which is the secret of yoga. Without even-mindedness there cannot be any true spirituality. Mere action is inferior to action performed with evenness of mind.

Hence, proceeding, the Lord says:

**Seek refuge in this evenness. (II, 49)**

In other words, practice this evenness of mind incessantly, in order to be well grounded in this fundamental discipline.

What will you attain by being grounded in this discipline? Being grounded in evenness of mind, you will develop the power to cast off the binding effect of karmas, good and bad.

This skill in action is also called *yoga*, which is productive of liberating power and ineffable bliss. Hence the Lord says in the next imperative:

**Therefore strive for this *yoga*. (II, 50)**

Now, naturally the question arises, when *yoga* depends on evenness of mind, why not give up all work, for it is work which generates all kinds of huff and puff, tensions, and difficulties in human relations?

Oh no, says the Lord, you just cannot do that. For even the bare maintenance of your body will not be possible if you remain inactive. The Lord, therefore, says:

**Do your allotted action. (III, 8)**

Whatever action you have come to have on hand by righteous means at any stage of life—that is your allotted action. Through doing that alone, with evenness of mind, you are bound to grow spiritually.

True, work can create bondage. Again, through work alone we have to find our salvation. The world, says Sri Krishna, becomes bound by action unless the action is done “for the sake of the sacrifice”; in other words, unless it is done as an offering unto the Lord.

The strategy is to get God somehow involved with everything we think or do.

Suppose you have a flashlight tied on your forehead. Then you may enter into a dark cave. You may turn in different directions, but you cannot help seeing all things before you lighted. With God as the guiding spirit, whatever we may think or do can only bring us liberation.

So says Sri Krishna in the next imperative:

**Therefore, give up attachment, and do your work for the sake of the Lord. (III, 9)**

That is very well said and easily said, too. We would like to do it. But what do we do, then, with our household work, office work—work that is somehow “our work”—in the kitchen, in the garden, in the workshop, in clinics, in firms, in studios?

This brings us to one of Sri Krishna’s most helpful teachings. The Lord shows us the skill and technique of transforming every work—“our work”—into a spiritually liberating instrument. His next imperative is:

**Always do without attachment the work you have to do; for a man who does his work without attachment attains the Supreme. (III, 19)**

This is, however, more easily said than done, this working without attachment. All sorts of questions and doubts arise in our mind. Yet we know that this is a magnificent precept.

No one knows our difficulties in this matter better than Sri Krishna. So he further instructs us and teaches us the technique of such action:

**Surrendering all actions to the Lord, with mind centered on the Self, getting rid of hope and selfishness, fight-free from mental fever. (III, 30)**

Yes, we want to. But we cannot. Why can't we fight without mental fever? Who prevents us from doing this? Alas! No one from outside. It is our uncontrolled senses that cloud our vision and subvert our will. We know what is right, but we cannot do it; we know what is wrong, but we cannot desist from doing it.

So says Sri Krishna in his following imperative, in the most understandable way:

**Therefore, at the outset, control the senses, and slay this foul destroyer of knowledge and liberation. (III, 41)**

Further:

**Destroy this enemy who comes in the guise of desire and is hard to overcome. (III, 43)**

Now, do not be frightened at the prospect of having to do something impossible. You are not being asked to blaze a new path with all its hazards. People in ancient times, the seekers of liberation like you, knew this and worked like this. It is the path which has been tried and found helpful.

So the Lord says persuasively:

**Therefore, do your work in the manner the ancients did in olden times. (IV, 15)**

All those doubts and other obstacles can be surmounted only by firm resolution to become a yogi. It is not that a particular type of person only has to and can become a yogi. Every person who does not want to stay a fool of the world,

a creature of maya or spiritual ignorance, must aim at becoming a yogi. Through whatever he does in life, he should seek union with the Supreme Spirit.

The yogi is greater than men of austerities, greater than men of knowledge, greater than men of action. So the Lord insists:

**Therefore, become a yogi, O Arjuna. (VI, 46)**

Do not say: "O, I am a householder. I cannot become a yogi." Arjuna was a householder. Sri Krishna asked him to become a yogi. But how do you become a yogi? Where do you have to go to become a yogi? You have not to go anywhere. In your own apartment you can become a yogi. It is so easy! And so great indeed is the challenge.

Sri Krishna teaches the easiest way of becoming a yogi, and in effect, of conquering the battle of life. He says:

**Therefore, at all times remember me and fight. (VIII, 7)**

What is yoga in practice? Sri Ramakrishna says it is linking or uniting the mind with God, somehow or anyhow. Life is a battlefield. Here you must fight to win. If, however, you fight with mental fever, then you are sure to lose the battle, for that will make you forget God. To forget God is to be reduced to dust and straw, mud and filth. How can mere dust and straw win against all the forces of life? Christ very significantly said: "Without me ye can do nothing."

The battle of life will be won only if you constantly remember God and fight. When you remember God and fight, you are then armed with God's wisdom and power. You then become invincible. No power on earth can then defeat you.

THE SNAG, however, comes here. How to remember God constantly?

Well, what makes you forget God? Is it not your work or your various other preoccupations? But suppose you do your work, every bit of it, for the sake of God alone, then how can you forget him?

So comes the Lord's most strategic imperative:

**Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away, and whatever you practice in the form of austerities—do it all as an offering to God. (IX, 27)**

Here is the secret of remembering God constantly: to do everything as an offering to God.

Yet the wayward mind may ask obstinately: "How am I to do everything for God? Why should I?"

If you only know how tenderly the Lord watches over you, protects you at every step, you would not find it difficult to do everything for the Lord's sake. If you were convinced that God loves you—and that he is more loyal to you than you ever had the capacity of being to him, then, for sheer love's sake you would delight in doing everything for the Lord's sake.

Indeed, in order to assure us that God loves us, Sri Krishna anxiously makes it a point to say:

**Proclaim it boldly, O Son of Kunti, that my devotee never perishes. (IX, 31)**

There are various concepts of God. Some concepts place you on the run after a continually receding God. He is like a mirage in the desert. He is constantly the conqueror. And you are perpetually the fool.

Deal not with this indifferent, this ever-receding, God. Let him go his way. Go after the anxious God, the God of love. Go after the God who watches your steps as you move away and celebrates your return when you come back. Go after the manward-moving, anxious God.

This manward-moving God wants you to know that by loving him you can become indestructible. Almost impatient to insure your safety, Sri Krishna importunes:

**Having come unto this transitory, joyless world,  
worship me. (IX, 33)**

Moreover:

**Fix your mind on me, be devoted to me, sacrifice to  
me, bow down to me. (IX, 34)**

What a heart-rending agony of the Highest! God coming and begging for your love. Whoever understands this anguish of God—the poor, poor thing!

After giving himself away in a general way the Lord wants to be sure that he has reached you in a personal way too. So he says:

**Fix your mind on me alone, rest your thoughts on me  
alone, and in me alone you will live hereafter. Of this  
there is no doubt. (XII, 8)**

But could it not be that someone would be unable to pin his mind on God? Should he be left without grace because he is unable to lodge God in his heart?

This is unbearable to the anxious God, who is law, no doubt, but particularly is love. So even before being asked, the Lord says:

**If you are unable to fix your mind steadily on me,  
then seek to reach me by yoga of constant practice.  
(XII, 9)**

But could it not again be that some are unable even to do this yoga of constant practice? Will they be lost because they do not know how to keep their minds centered in God? Such a prospect is not bearable to the anxious Lord. So he exclaims:

**If you are incapable of constant practice, then devote yourself to my service. For, even by rendering service to me for my sake only, you will attain perfection.** (XII, 10)

Could it not be again that there is a poor pathetic fool somewhere like me who cannot do even this? What will happen to him? Will there be no grace for the hapless, nay the least?

With what tenderness, what unthinkable understanding the Lord comes to our level and says these soul-soothing words:

**If you are unable to do even this, then be self-controlled, surrender the fruit of all action, and take refuge in me.** (XII, 11)

The Lord has given us all that he could give by way of helping us to proceed step by step toward the fulfillment of our high destiny, which is union with the Supreme Spirit.

But then, but then, how many of us are capable of taking such ever-wakeful spiritual care of ourselves? After advancing two steps do we not next seem to fall back five, out of sheer inner exhaustion? Then are we going to be buried in ignominy under the debris of our futile spiritual efforts? Have we then no spiritual future?

The Lord in effect says: Who says you haven't? You have rather a more assured future.

To have finally known that, left to yourself, you can not, is to have at long last known that God alone can. That is resignation, when you have really known it. Do not then worry in the least.

In order to get us grounded in this state through life's functional process, the Lord had earlier exhorted:

**Arjuna, be an instrument in God's hand. (XI, 33)**

Allow God to course through your being. That is wisdom attained.

Then, concentrating all his compassion in one supreme imperative, the Lord opens the floodgate of his grace on all seekers for all time. He says:

**Abandon all formalities of religion and come to me alone for shelter. I shall deliver you from all sins. Do not grieve. (XVIII, 66)**

SUCH are the universal, and yet so personal, imperatives of the Bhagavad-Gita, the Lord's direct thrusts into our souls.

It would appear that it is not a case of our knocking and God's opening. The case really is of God's knocking and knocking, and perchance our opening. He has tried in ever so many ways down the ages. In this anxious and vibrant way, in this direct, appealing, and imploring way in the Gita he keeps on trying, keeps on crying, keeps on calling, "Come unto me!"

Should we not respond? Can we have the heart not to respond?



# Vedanta and the West

*Vedanta teaches that man's real nature is divine; that it is the aim of man's life to unfold and manifest this divinity; and that truth is universal. Vedanta accepts all the religions of the world and reveres the great prophets, teachers, and sons of God, because it recognizes the same divine inspiration in all.*

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