

Holy Mother - A Talk

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Friends, I must frankly express to you that I miss my dear brother, Swami Pavitrananda, very much, as those of you do who came in contact with him and feel his absence as the loss of a light in the midst of darkness. The Swami and I were very close friends during our college days. Together we sat at the feet of Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna. I have seen Swami Pavitrananda arguing with Swami Turiyananda, and Turiyananda just smiling at him. At that time, I thought, "Who is this boy who is bold enough to argue with Swami Turiyananda, the great lion of Vedanta?" Then I came to know of him through Swami Akhilananda.

Swami Akhilananda and I studied in the same college. He was senior to me by one year. It was Swami Akhilananda who introduced me to Swami Brahmanandaji, the President of the Order. Almost every week we used to visit Swami Brahmananda and pay our respects. One evening, Maharaj was not present in Balaram Bose's house. Some devotees asked me whether I would like to go to Udbodhan to see Holy Mother. I asked Swami Akhilananda whether he would like to go. He said, "I have some business with a senior Swami. I cannot go, but you had better go. I have seen the Mother but you have not. It will be a good fortune for you."

The Udbodhan was about a ten or fifteen minute walk from Balaram Bose's house. At the Udbodhan I was seated in the office room when Swami Dhirananda, Krishnalal Maharaj, addressed me and said, "Young boy, I have seen you at Balaram Bose's house several times. Who will take your responsibility?" At that time I was studying Kant, Hegel and my favourite philosopher, Plato, whom I admired as the most outstanding philosopher of Western thought. I liked Aristotle for his system of logic, but Plato I esteemed for his transcendental ideal. To Swami Dhirananda, I explained that I was a rugged individualist, like a young American boy. In St. Paul's College it was compulsory to read the Bible; I did not read the Bhagavad Gita. Swami Dhirananda kept quiet and finally said, "You do not know anything about spiritual life. In spiritual life there should be a mentor, a guide who holds the torch and shows you the way. Suppose you go to a cave temple which is all dark. If you are alone, you bump

¹ Swami Aseshananda (1899-1996) was a disciple of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother and the President of Vedanta Society of Portland (1955-1996).

your head on the walls. But if you find a priest who holds a torch, then you can see the deity unhurt and be satisfied." I asked the Swami, "What do you mean? Kindly explain to me." He replied, "I mean Holy Mother upstairs. You should go and ask her grace to initiate you into spiritual life."

The year was 1917. In those days not much was known about Holy Mother publicly. No books were available depicting her life in detail, and no photographs of her were circulated. The Udbodhan House was built by Swami Saradananda for the convenience of Holy Mother and her relatives when she would come to Calcutta. The office room in which I was seated was downstairs. Upstairs was the shrine room in which Holy Mother lived. Women were permitted to visit the Mother every day, but the men were restricted to Tuesdays and Saturdays only.

Brahmachari Rashbihari, who served Holy Mother in the Udbodhan as well as in Jayrambati, came to the office room where I was seated and said, "Those who want to see the Mother should follow me." He advised us not to speak to Mother, but only to prostrate, touch her feet and return down by another staircase. So I followed him, came before Mother who was veiled, prostrated myself, touched her feet, and proceeded down the stairs. Seeing me, Swami Dhirananda inquired, "Did you ask Mother to shower her grace upon you, to accept you and give you initiation?" I said, "Maharaj, I was not permitted to speak." Then the Swami called, "Rashbihari, you take this boy to Holy Mother, tell her that he goes to Maharaj and that she should kindly shower her grace upon him." Knowing that Rashbihari was a little orthodox, he explained that I was a brahmin boy, coming from a good family, that I was studying in college, etc. So I was permitted to see Mother again. This time she had no veil. Mother said to me, "Why, my child, you go to Rakhal; Rakhal can give you initiation. He is entitled to give, so why ask me?" I had the good fortune to say, "Mother, if you shower your grace, I will consider it a great privilege. It will be a God-send to me, my great fortune." Then Mother remained silent, and agreed saying, "All right, come after two days. Take your bath in the Ganges, do not take any breakfast, and come to the office room downstairs; wait there till I call you. I will perform Thakur's worship and will send someone to call you upstairs for initiation."

When I came downstairs and reported what Mother said to Swami Dhirananda, he was extremely pleased, so joyful, as if his joy were greater than my joy. That day, I had no idea that I would seek the grace of a great soul in the form of initiation. It was suddenly offered to me. I was then seventeen years old, and at that time I did not know the meaning of initiation. I took it for granted that Mother wanted to make me feel that she was very close to me, that she was my very own even though I was a stranger. To tell you the truth, I did not think at that time that Holy Mother was the Divine Mother herself. It was Swami Saradananda who later opened my eyes to that side of Mother's nature. Mother, as it were, kept all her power hidden. I simply felt she was very

kind, very affectionate, very compassionate, but not that she was the Divine Mother come to earth in human form.

Afterwards, I reported my meeting with Mother to Swami Akhilananda. I said I did not know what initiation meant or what I was expected to do, or how to prepare for it. He said he would explain, not to worry. The evening before I was to go to Mother, Swami Akhilananda and I went to the College Street Market. We bought some fruits, sweets, flowers, and a red-bordered cloth to be offered to the guru. That night I was a little worried. I had heard from Swami Akhilananda that the relationship between the guru and the student was forged by a sacred word, called the mantra. Swami Akhilananda told me that whatever mantra the guru gave in initiation was to be accepted. The student was not to give any suggestions. But I already had a certain way of thinking about my Chosen Ideal. If Mother were to change that, then what would I do? I could not keep quiet. I would have to speak out my mind. I would have to tell her, "Mother, I prefer this way." For some time I was in difficulty and could not sleep.

The next morning, Swami Akhilananda and I took a bath in the Ganges and went to wait in the office of the Udbodhan. The call came and I went upstairs. Mother performed the worship, but did not ask me to meditate in the beginning. Then she gave me the sacred word, and it rang a bell in my heart. I thought, "Mother must be great; she knows my mind." So I was satisfied. Then Mother asked me, "Will you take prasad, cooked food?" I said, "Mother, I have not asked for leave for the whole day, only half the day." So Mother gave me some fruits and sweets and then I returned down the stairs.

Many ask, "What is this initiation?" Mother used to give the reply, "Whatever I am to do for the disciple, I have done at the time of initiation." Those who have been initiated by the great Swamis of our Order should always remember that the guru lives in the mantra. With the repetition of the mantra, the spiritual form of the teacher appears. It is our faith that the mantra given by an illuminated soul has tremendous power. Can you imagine the power then, when the Divine Mother herself comes to this earth and imparts spiritual wisdom to seekers after Truth, to seekers after God?

Rashbihari Maharaj (Swami Arupananda) saw after my initiation that I did not receive a rosary. He said, "Mother has given you spiritual instructions, no doubt, but you do not have any beads." I said, "Will you kindly help me?" He agreed provided that I would give him the money for purchasing. So I gave him about \$5, and he asked me to return in two days when Holy Mother would purify and sanctify the rosary. After the two days I returned, whereupon he said that for my sake he had examined all the beads to see whether they were mature or immature. I was amazed and said, "How do you examine beads for maturity? We examine people for maturity by their stability, but beads?" Then he described the method: you drop a bead in a bowl of water; if it sinks, then the bead is considered

mature; if it floats on the surface, then it is immature. I then went upstairs to Holy Mother with the rosary. She showed me how to perform japa, repeating the Name on the rosary, and described how to think and meditate on the Ishtam, the Chosen Ideal.

In later years, Swami Saradananda gave me the spiritual awakening necessary to understand what I had received on those auspicious days from Holy Mother. When through her grace, I became Swami Saradananda's secretary, the letters he dictated to me gave detailed spiritual instructions to his disciples. If the disciple could not remember the mantra, the Swami would personally write the letter. Otherwise, I wrote all instructions. One day, after the Swami's meditation, I approached him, prostrated myself and said, "Maharaj, Holy Mother instructed me in a very simple way. She did not ask me to repeat the mantra for a fixed number of times in morning or evening, or for special days and all that. She did not give me any fixed method. Maharaj, I want a kind of step by step procedure. Could you please add something?" Then Swami Saradananda said, "You are the greatest fool. Holy Mother is the Divine Mother herself. All these methods and procedures are given by other teachers, but not Holy Mother. Whatever Holy Mother has given you is the last word in spiritual life. You cling to the mantra, repeat it, meditate and think of your Chosen Ideal; and when the longing for the vision of God comes, you will find that your mind will know it, that your mind will be fixed on the Divine Spirit, and that all your desires will be fulfilled. Do you mean to say that I should add something to what Holy Mother has given? It is due to her grace that I am here even." Swami Saradananda then opened my eyes to the fact that Holy Mother was not simply a saintly woman. She was the embodiment of God as the Divine Mother, the dynamic aspect of Brahman. As fire and its burning power are inseparable, similarly are Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother connected in a spiritual bond which transcends our intellectual understanding and our philosophical wisdom. She was the example of the holy life, pure, simple.

If one desires to contact the Divine Spirit, life should be made holy, ideally as Holy Mother lived, a silent, simple holy life. She was not merely quiet and reserved; no, she had united her mind with the universal Spirit or consciousness and was poised in the Supreme Self. By her initiation, Holy Mother transmitted spiritual power to her disciples; she had the illumination which makes it possible. Hers was a silent, holy life, but her presence created a tangible spiritual atmosphere of grace and peace... a veritable tirtha or place of pilgrimage.

If you were to ask what Holy Mother represented, I would first say the Madonna ideal of the west - the ideal of the eternal virgin of absolute purity. Further, living her silent, holy life in a domestic setting with her relations, Holy Mother represented the householder ideal. Her life exemplifies how the lay devotees can aspire after and realize God. Mother achieved a great domestic harmony and deep spiritual poise while living close to her relatives who were concerned with worldly matters. They did

not think in terms of Moksha or liberation; they wanted money and help to solve their many problems and difficulties. It is to Holy Mother that householder devotees can especially turn to for guiding light. To me, Sri Ramakrishna represents more the monastic ideal, as we see in the training of his young disciples. In Mother's life we find the ideal of profound simplicity. From Mother I have learned these values: simplicity and purity. All great things in life are very simple. The mother's love that we enjoy as children is very simple. But despite Holy Mother's great simplicity, there was a subtlety which made her difficult to understand. We are prone to think in sensational, supernatural and uncommon ways. What seems natural is for us too ordinary. If given a mantra and told to wrap it three times around our head and do this and that, then we would believe it was really something. But if given in a simple way, do we understand its worth? Holy Mother was the ideal teacher who gave spiritual instructions in a simple way. Due to her grace I was able to think in terms of joining this Order and do my part in her work for the devotees. But I have understood very little of her. Sri Ramakrishna truly understood Mother, and the grand ideals she represented. That is why he spoke to Golap-Ma in the way in which she described to me one incident.

I joined the Order after Holy Mother's mahasamadhi (passing away), and I had the privilege of serving Golap-Ma and Yogin-Ma, Holy Mother's companions. I can say it now, that it was not easy to serve them. They were very exacting. One day I said to Golap-Ma, "If I had joined the Order when Holy Mother was alive, I could have served her." Then Golap-Ma said, "Who could understand her? I have lived so close with her, and could not understand her." She then related this incident to me how one time she had heard from someone that Sri Ramakrishna left Dakshineswar and went to Shyampukur because Holy Mother was feeding him too much, which aggravated his illness. Holy Mother was then living in the Nahabat at Dakshineswar. As soon as she heard that, she walked all the way to Sri Ramakrishna and asked him, "Is it a fact that you are dissatisfied with my service, and that is the reason why you have come to Shyampukur?" Stunned, Sri Ramakrishna said, "Who said that?" Then Holy Mother told him that she had heard from so and so that it is Golap. "Let that brahmin woman come. I am going to teach her a lesson." When Sri Ramakrishna would become angry, none could approach him. Then Golap came the next day. Sri Ramakrishna said to her, "Did you say that, did you? Go and ask pardon. If she becomes dissatisfied, then you will have no place here." Then he said, "Sarada-Saraswati, although she looks like Sarada (that means the name only), she is the Divine Mother Herself, the giver of knowledge and wisdom. She has come to impart wisdom, the knowledge of God, and to give illumination by her grace." Golap-Ma then told me that she cried all the way from Shyampukur to Dakshineswar and fell at Holy Mother's feet and said to her. "Mother, please forgive me. I heard from so and so, therefore I repeated. I should not have done that. Forgive me. Thakur has become very angry. He will not allow me to see

him anymore until you pardon me." Then Holy Mother patted her on the back saying, "Forget, forget. You are my daughter; a mother cannot be angry with her daughter. You tell Thakur that I am quite pleased with you." You see, Golap-Ma was so frank and outspoken that she landed into difficulty. It was Sri Ramakrishna who opened Golap-Ma's eyes a little to Mother's unique divine nature and calibre.

This spiritual knowledge which Holy Mother came to disseminate by the example of her life and experience is really beyond our faith or reason. Its nature is to awaken us from our "dogmatic slumber" of philosophy. Mother represents the divine wisdom that is born of transcendental experience wherein there is no distinction between subject and object. There comes a point where reason is unreason, and we realise that it cannot solve all problems. Reason divides between subject and object and further determines the categories of time, space and causation. Whatever we know through reason is coloured by the intellect. As long as we live in the world of time, space and causation, our knowledge is only partial and pragmatic. That is what is called maya. It is not illusion. It means what is relative to the state of our consciousness. The west has accepted two traditions: one theological, and the other scientific. But these belong to the category of lower knowledge and not the divine knowledge which Holy Mother represents. Holy Mother's life and spiritual experience transcend the realm of duality. Her life demonstrated what man must seek and how to seek it. Great Teachers like Christ, Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother come to live the life and make the experience of God real to mankind. We must strive to live up to the spiritual ideal which these great luminaries present before us in their lives. Such great souls as Holy Mother come to give the supreme knowledge that the bounds of death can be crossed, to give the firm conviction that we can realise our true nature. Their lives are the highest blessing to mankind. Therefore, I believe that as long as I follow Holy Mother's footprints and am true to the mantra she has given me out of her infinite grace, then I will be able to do the work she has given me, at least to my own satisfaction. You see, unless a man is satisfied within himself, he cannot give real satisfaction to others. Only light can give light. And Holy Mother, being the Divine Mother herself, gave this light for the sake of mankind and its attainment of brahmajnana and liberation from relative existence.

I heard one time from Holy Mother's disciple, Chandra Mohandutta, that he was going to take his bath with Swami Shuddhananda, who later became the President of our Order. I was then working as the assistant to the manager of the office in the Udbodhan, and Chandra was attending to the packing of books. Swami Shuddhananda said to Chandra, "Well, you go to Mother, what do you ask her for?" Chandra replied, "I ask her for some sweets as prasad." Then the Swami said, "Have you come to Mother only to beg prasad? Have you come only for that? Mother is mukti-dayana, the giver of liberation. You ask Mother for brahmajnana and for

liberation." Chandra said, "All right, Swami, I will do that." So, returning to the Udbodhan, Chandra went to Mother's room by the staircase in front of Golap-Ma's room. Mother was then performing the noon-day worship and was silent, as is customary while at worship. Mother saw Chandra and asked through a sign. "My child, what can I do for you?" Chandra said, "I got palpitation of heart. I was thinking that I would ask, 'Mother, please give me brahmajnana, the knowledge of Brahman - and if that is too much, then mukti, or liberation, or at least moksha.' But no word would come. I felt as though I were suffocating. Then I somehow blurted out, 'Prasad, Mother!' Then Holy Mother pointed out a plate of prasad covered underneath her cot." Chandra said he took some rasgollas, sandesh and chum-chums and went away. He told Swami Shuddhananda, "Well, Swami, I was prepared to ask, but something happened, I do not know what." Therefore, it cannot be tutored; it must be the spontaneous yearning of the child to its Mother for deliverance from the bonds of maya. But Chandra was so very devoted to Mother, and Mother was so very fond of him. I believe that at the last moment he came into Mother's arms and took eternal refuge from this relative world.

It is because of Chandra that I became so very devoted to Swami Saradananda and dedicated to his service. Chandra told me one day that he went to Holy Mother and said to her in all sincerity, "Mother, I want to serve you." And Mother said, "No, my child, Sarala is there" - Sarala later became Bharataprana, the President of Sarada Math. "But you go and serve my child Sharat. If you are loyal, steadfast and sincere in your service to him, you will attain brahmajnana. Anyone who will serve Sharat in such a manner will reach the highest." And that is the reason why I did not like to go anywhere leaving Swami Saradananda. As long as this great soul would allow me to serve him, I wanted to be near him. The Swamis used to go to Allahabad for kumbhamehla, and Swami Saradananda one time asked me if I would like to go, that many Swamis would assemble. I said, "Maharaj, I am quite content here, I do not want to go anywhere."

To me, Swami Saradananda was like Mother, my mother. It was due to Mother's grace that the distance between Swami Saradananda and myself was removed, and he allowed me the great fortune to serve him. You see, the first day when I went to see Holy Mother, Swami Saradananda scolded me strongly for being careless and leaving my shoes at the threshold. I thereby became much afraid of Swami Saradananda and would avoid meeting him. But I would pray to Mother to remove this fear when I would go to the shrine. Then, suddenly, one day the Swami called me and asked, "Would you be able to write letters for me?" I said, "Yes, Maharaj." "But one thing," he said, "do not disclose anything you write down ever to your best friend." I said, "Maharaj, if I be disloyal to your trust, then you can fire me." But I kept my promise. If anyone would ask me any questions, I would keep silent. When one of Swami Saradananda's disciples complained and requested the Swami to write the letter himself, he said, "But I am writing through a person who

will not let out a single word, even at the cost of his life." Then I thought, "Well, how does he know that?" You see, trust begets trust.

These great souls such as Holy Mother and Swami Saradananda come down from their Himalayan heights, live with us as our mentors, as our torch-bearers and guide us to the supreme goal of God - realisation in this very life. So really it is very difficult for me to speak of such an ideal teacher as Holy Mother. I have simply touched her feet, have seen her face and have heard her voice. Now I look forward with the intense care and attention of my mind for her to take me across from the world of maya to the world of eternal sunshine, unfailing beauty and everlasting joy and truth.

The pang of separation from the Beloved Lord cannot be described in human words, nor comprehended by the logical mind, but it can be felt by a devoted heart. We can live without many things, but we cannot live without God. We must try to be true and dedicated to our ideal. With all humility and reverence, I say that anything I have been able to achieve in this life is due to the grace of Holy Mother. And, therefore, I commend you all to the care of Sri Ramakrishna, the modern symbol and expression of universal love, and to the care of Holy Mother, who will be your Divine Mother and accept you, whatever you are without asking any questions. They will lift your consciousness to the height where the Supreme Truth will be realised, where the sun will ever shine and the darkness of maya disappear forever.