

Direct Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna
Life of Swami Brahmananda
(Raja Maharaj)
(1863-1922)



"Mother, once I asked Thee to give me a companion just like myself. Is that why Thou hast given me Rakhhal?"

-- **Sri Ramakrishna** (conversing with the Divine Mother)

"Ah, what a nice character Rakhhal has developed! Look at his face and every now and then you will notice his lips moving. Inwardly he repeats the name of God, and so his lips move.

"Youngsters like him belong to the class of the ever-perfect. They are born with God-Consciousness. No sooner do they grow a little older than they realize the danger of coming in contact with the world. There is the parable of the homa bird in the Vedas. The bird lives high up in the sky and never descends to earth. It lays its eggs in the sky, and the egg begins to fall. But the bird lives in such a high region that the egg hatches while falling. The fledgling comes out and continues to fall. But it is still so high that while falling it grows wings and its eyes open. Then the young bird perceives that it is dashing down toward the earth and will be instantly killed. The moment it sees the ground, it turns and shoots up toward its mother in the sky. Then its one goal is to reach its mother.

"Youngsters like Rakhhal are like that bird. From their very childhood they are afraid of the world, and their one thought is how to reach the Mother, how to realize God."

-- **Sri Ramakrishna**

Swami Brahmananda (1863-1922), whose life and teachings are recorded in this, was in a mystical sense, an 'eternal companion' of the Great Master, Sri Ramakrishna. He was also looked upon as his 'spiritual son' by the Great Master, and was recognized by Swami Vivekananda as a 'Himalaya of Spirituality' and as the 'Raja' (king or leader) of the spiritual Brotherhood he founded.

Swami Prabhavananda, the author of this biographical section and the editor of his Teachings, was a very intimate disciple of the Swami Brahmananda, and therefore one who could speak with authority on his Master. Swami Prabhavananda says this about his Master:

Swami Brahmananda was one of the most eminent and one of the most beloved of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna -- the first also to come to Him. Sri Ramakrishna regarded him as His own son and admitted him to the utmost intimacy. In this familiar daily intercourse, the disciple caught the glint of the Master's effulgence. It shone through all he said, all he did, all he was. It gave him unlimited

power and insight, and an authority no one thought to dispute. This last he used sparingly. He led rather by quiet appeal than by more insistent methods, but so mighty was his spiritual force that his gentlest suggestion was to those who heard it, a word of command.

INTRODUCTION

To write the biography of an illumined soul is very difficult, if not impossible; for his is pre-eminently an inner life. True, he may engage in certain external activities; he may achieve the kind of success which impresses the outer world; but all these activities and achievements--including even his spoken and written teachings--will fall far short of, and fail to express, the real man.

An ordinary professor or scholar teaches out of his accumulated learning. Such a man's scholarship is far greater than the man himself. That is to say, he may teach the loftiest truths, theoretically, without having made them a part of his own life and experience. A man of spiritual wisdom also teaches these truths, not theoretically, but out of his own experience. Nevertheless, the expression of these truths in words cannot possibly correspond to the vastness of his inner knowledge, which is inexpressible because it is transcendental. We know a man with our mind and senses; but our mind and senses cannot reveal to us the nature of an illumined soul. In order to be able fully to understand such a soul a man must himself be illumined.

When you go into the presence of one of these great beings, something very wonderful happens. His mere presence gives you, as it were, a supersense which enables you to recognize the greatness which is in him. Maharaj (as Swami Brahmananda was called) used to give us that supersense whenever we were with him. Our minds were lifted up and caught glimpses of his inner nature; but these glimpses were only partial. We were aware that the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who were themselves illumined souls, could see more in Maharaj than we, his disciples, ever saw. Swami Ramakrishnananda, founder and head of the Ramakrishna Monastery in Madras, once introduced Maharaj to his disciples there saying: "None of you have seen Sri Ramakrishna himself; but now you see Maharaj, and that is the same thing." On another occasion a devotee brought fruit which he wanted to offer to Sri Ramakrishna in the shrine. Swami Ramakrishnananda told him to offer it to Maharaj, and said: "To offer this fruit to Maharaj is as good as offering it to Sri Ramakrishna."

One day I hesitated to accept something that Maharaj told me. Swami Shivananda was present at the time, and he agreed with Maharaj immediately. I did not like this. Later I talked to Swami Shivananda alone and more or less accused him of being a "yes-man" to Maharaj. Swami Shivananda laughed and said: "My boy, you see in Maharaj only Maharaj; but we see the external form of Maharaj with nothing inside it but God. Whatever Maharaj tells you comes directly from God."

It should be remembered that this statement was not made by a mere ignorant enthusiast, but by one who was himself an illumined soul. Its truth was not clear to me at the time, but later I began to understand and believe it because of a talk which I had with Maharaj himself. One day he asked me to look at the almanac and find an auspicious date for his departure from Madras. As I did so, I could not help smiling. Maharaj noticed this and asked me why I was amused. I replied: "Well, Maharaj,

you always go through this routine, whenever you plan to go anywhere, but then you suddenly make up your mind to leave on some other day".

At this Maharaj said: "Do you think I do anything according to my own will? The devotees insist upon fixing some date for my going, so to avoid constant pestering I fix a tentative date. But I do not move or do anything until I know the will of the Lord."

"Do you mean to say," I asked, "that you are always guided by the will of God?"

Maharaj: "Yes."

Myself: "Well, Maharaj, I too may think or feel that I am doing the will of God, when actually I am only following my own inclinations and attributing them to God's will. Isn't that what you do?"

Maharaj: "No, my child, it is not the same."

Myself: "Then do you mean to say that you actually see God and talk to him directly and know his will?"

Maharaj: "Yes, I wait until I know his will directly and he tells me what I should do."

Myself: "For everything you do?"

Maharaj: "Yes, for everything I do I have the direct guidance of God."

Myself: "And do you accept only those disciples he wants you to accept?"

Maharaj: "Yes."

After this talk with him I began to find some meaning in his peculiar way of acting. For example, whenever any of us would ask his advice, he would say: "Wait. My brain is not working today," or: "My stomach is upset, I'll answer tomorrow." Sometimes many tomorrows would pass before the disciple got any definite answer. But when Maharaj did finally speak there was always a special power behind his words.

"How does he know the will of God? Does he go into *samadhi* every time before he knows it?" This was the thought that continually crossed my mind. But, not daring to ask him, I waited, hoping somehow to get an answer. Then, one day, I was discussing with another disciple the spiritual visions of "Gopal's Mother," a woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. She had been given this name because she used to see Gopal, the boy Krishna, playing with her, walking beside her, and calling her "Mother." I expressed my opinion that these visions of "Gopal's Mother" belonged to the transcendental plane, and that I did not believe she had actually seen Sri Krishna with her physical eyes. Maharaj, who was sitting his room, overhead me. He came

out and said rather sarcastically: "Ah! So you are omniscient!"

"But Maharaj," I asked, "how can one see God in the external world with physical eyes?"

Maharaj simply made this statement in English: "Show me the line of demarcation where matter ends and spirit begins."

In other words, I understood him to say that when the eye of the spirit opens one sees *Brahman* everywhere.

The following teachings of Shankara in his *Viveka Chudamani (Crest-Jewel of Discrimination)* elucidate the above remark of Maharaj:

"Our perception of the universe is a continuous perception of Brahman, though the ignorant man is not aware of this. Indeed, this universe is nothing but Brahman. See Brahman everywhere, under all circumstances, with the eye of the spirit and a tranquil heart. How can the physical eyes see anything but physical objects? How can the mind of the enlightened man think of anything other than the reality?"

In the Upanishads we read that "a knower of Brahman becomes Brahman." What is it that attracts people to a man of God? Young and old, boys and girls, men, women and children, saints and sinners -- all felt an indefinable attraction to Maharaj, even if they did not in the least understand what was meant by a "knower of Brahman."

When I first met Maharaj I was a boy of eighteen. I did not know anything about God or the realization of God, yet I felt drawn to him as to a long-lost friend who was very near and dear to me. I had never felt such a love before in my life: it was the love of parents and the love of a friend, all in one. Every one had the same experience. Once I asked Swami Subodhananda, another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, the reason for this all-satisfying love which emanates from Maharaj. The Swami replied: "God is love. Maharaj has realized God. Therefore he is full of love."

You did not have to be pure-hearted or spiritually minded to love Maharaj. Even the most depraved natures felt this love when they came into his presence and many of them were transformed into saints. Maharaj did not talk to everybody about God or spiritual matters or philosophical truths; he would come down, as it were to the level of each individual; he became that person. He had the power to uplift a man without his even knowing it; and when that person left his presence he was bathed in love and purity. When you were in the presence of Maharaj you completely forgot yourself. You felt you were in another world where there was no worry or grief, and where man was not man but divine. You were filled with a peculiar joy which you could neither explain nor understand.

Maharaj's bearing was stately and regal. He was tall and well-built, and his face was serene and joyful. His eyes were deep, and seemed always to be gazing into the infinite. Whenever he looked at you, you felt that he was probing the depths of your innermost nature and that he knew all your weaknesses and failings. But somehow

you did not mind this being known through and through because those eyes were so full of mercy and love. We never feared to be known by him. Then there were other times when, though his eyes were wide open, it seemed as if the universe no longer existed for him; he seemed to be living in a different world altogether.

His hands and feet were beautifully formed, and they possessed a peculiar attraction. His back strikingly resembled the back of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Turiyananda once told me how, many years after the passing of Sri Ramakrishna, he saw Maharaj from behind, walking in the grounds of the Belur Monastery, and mistook him for Sri Ramakrishna himself.

Once in a crowded railway station I overheard a man who had been observing Maharaj exclaim to a friend: "Look at that man! What part of India does he come from? He isn't like a Madrasi, or a Parsi, or a Bengali, or a Punjabi. Can you guess his nationality?"

And the other answered: "No, I can't. But you can see very well that he is a man of God."

I

CHILDHOOD AND EARLY YEARS

Swami Brahmananda was born on January 21, 1863, at Sikra, a village near Calcutta, Bengal. His parents were Ananda Mohan Ghosh and Kailas Kamini. Kailas Kamini, his mother, was devoted to Krishna and she spent most of her time in prayer, worship and meditation. Maharaj was her only son. Being a devotee of Krishna, she named him Rakhai, "the shepherd boy." She passed away when Rakhai was five years old.

Rakhai liked being with other children and played all kinds of games with them. He was especially fond of "playing church." He would mould a clay image of the Divine Mother and worship her with his playmates. During religious festivals he would take his seat behind the priest, and sometimes while watching the worship he would be filled with a fervor of devotion and become absorbed in the thought of the Divine Mother.

Ananda Mohan loved gardening. As a child, Rakhai would work with his father, and learned gardening from him at an early age. He was also fond of fishing and would sit patiently with his fishing rod for hours by the pond. Even in later life, we saw that he had never lost these two early enthusiasms of childhood -- gardening and fishing.

From boyhood, he was a lover of music. He learned songs about the Divine Mother and Krishna. He and his friends would go into a mango grove and sing these songs together in chorus. In later years he encouraged his disciples to sing devotional songs, and he would always keep in his company a few who were expert musicians. Wherever he went, praises of the Lord would be sung.

When Rakhhal had finished his studies at the village primary school, he went to Calcutta to begin grammar school. He was then twelve years old. Attached to this school was an athletic club, which interested Rakhhal very much. The members of the club were young boys, and Naren (later known as Vivekananda) was their leader. This was how Rakhhal and Naren met. They were of the same age and became very fond of each other. Later both boys became pupils at a gymnasium directed by a Mr. Guha.

At this period Keshab Chandra Sen was exercising great influence over the youth of Bengal by his powerful oratory, his fervent devotion, and his vast knowledge of Eastern and Western religions. He was the leader of the Brahmo Samaj. He preached the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. In his talks, he would quote the Upanishads and the Christian Bible; his new line of approach revived an interest in religion among the educated classes of Bengal. The creed of the Brahmo Samaj was the theistic conception of the Godhead which is the only creed of Christianity and which is also to be found, among many other conceptions, in the Hindu scriptures. Keshab denounced as polytheism the Hindu cult of many gods and goddesses, although these are, in reality, merely aspects of the one Brahman. He was opposed to the worship of images in the temples. Naren and Rakhhal joined the movement and subscribed to its creed.

Rakhhal used to spend most of his time in prayer and contemplation, neglecting his studies. "God is our Father, our very own. How shall I reach him?" This was the only thought that occupied his mind. Sri Ramakrishna later used to say of him: "Rakhhal was born with an intense love for God. Such a love is usually acquired only after a man has practiced spiritual disciplines for many years or many lives." Rakhhal regularly attended the services of the Brahmo Samaj. His prayer that God might be revealed to him continued incessantly, like the act of breathing.

Rakhhal was not doing very well at school, so that, by the time he reached his sixteenth birthday his father was worried about the boy's future. He attributed the neglect of his studies to the emotionalism of adolescence which had turned his son's mind towards God. If Rakhhal were married, the father thought to himself, his mind would be brought down to earth. He would have to consider taking up a career and providing for his wife, and therefore he would study harder. So he arranged for Rakhhal's marriage to a young girl named Visweswari.

Keshab Chandra Sen was the first to preach publicly the greatness of Sri Ramakrishna. Devotees began to flock to the temple at Dakshineswar to visit the Master. Among them were Manomohan Mitra and Shyama Sundari, the brother and mother of Visweswari. At the time of Rakhhal's marriage, these two were already ardent devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, whom they regarded as an incarnation of Sri Chaitanya. Thus it came about that the worldly influence of marriage combined with the spiritual influence of Keshab brought Rakhhal to the feet of his future beloved master.

It was natural that Manomohan should introduce Rakhhal, his new brother-in-law, to Sri Ramakrishna. For some time before this visit, the Master had spiritual visions concerning his future disciple. Once Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother:

"Mother, I want someone to be my constant companion. Bring me a boy who is pure-hearted and intensely devoted to you." A few days later he saw in a mystic vision a boy standing under the banyan tree in the temple grounds. On another occasion, this same boy appeared to him in a different manner. To quote the Master's own words: "A few days before Rakhali came to me Mother place a little boy on my lap and said: 'This is your son.' At first I was startled. 'My son?' Mother smiled at this and made me understand that I was not to have a son in the ordinary sense but that this boy would be my spiritual son, one who would live up to the highest ideal of renunciation."

From this hour onward, Sri Ramakrishna waited eagerly for the coming of his spiritual son. A few moments before Rakhali actually arrived he had another vision. Suddenly he saw a hundred-petalled lotus blooming on the bosom of the Ganges, each of its petals shining with exquisite loveliness. On the lotus two boys were dancing with anklets on their feet. One of them was Sri Krishna himself; the other was the same boy he had seen in his earlier vision. Their dance was indescribably beautiful; every movement they made seemed to splash foam, as it were, from an ocean of sweetness. Sri Ramakrishna was lost in ecstasy.

Just then a boat arrived carrying Manomohan and Rakhali. Sri Ramakrishna looked at Rakhali in bewilderment. "What is this?" he thought to himself: "Here is the boy I saw standing under the banyan tree; here is the boy Mother placed on my lap; here is the boy I saw just now dancing on the lotus with Sri Krishna. This is the pure-hearted companion I prayed for to Mother."

Sri Ramakrishna regarded Rakhali for a few moments in silence. Then he smilingly remarked to Manomohan: "There are wonderful possibilities to this boy." After this, the Master talked to Rakhali for some time, as though he were an old friend.

"What is your name?" he asked.

Rakhali answered: "Rakhali Chandra Ghosh."

Hearing the name "Rakhali" Sri Ramakrishna was deeply excited, and muttered to himself: "Rakhali! The shepherd boy of Brindaban -- the playmate of Sri Krishna!"

Then, in a sweet affectionate voice, he said: "Come and see me again."

In the presence of the Master, Rakhali had experienced a peculiar feeling of joy, love and intense attraction. As he left the temple grounds, that voice in all its sweetness kept echoing within his heart: "Come and see me again." He knew that at last he had met a man who had seen and known God.

Rakhali went back to his home and to school, but he could not forget his visit to the Master. Sri Ramakrishna filled all his thoughts and he was impatient to see him again. A few days later, after school hours, he went alone to Dakshineswar. The Master welcomed him eagerly and said with great affection: "Why didn't you come back to me sooner? I have been waiting for you." Rakhali did not know what to

answer. He looked at the Master and felt that same ecstatic joy. He felt like a little child sitting at the feet of God, the Father of all. From that day onward, the relationship between these two was established. Rakhali saw in Ramakrishna father, mother and God. Sri Ramakrishna saw in Rakhali the Divine Child.

Rakhali's visit to the Master became more and more frequent. Sometimes he lived at the temple for days together. While he was there, his mind entirely forgot the everyday world and became absorbed in the consciousness of God and His presence. He felt himself to be the eternal companion of his divine master.

Recalling these early days with Rakhali, Sri Ramakrishna used to tell his intimate disciples: "No words can describe Rakhali's spiritual mood during that period. He was living in a state of ecstasy most of the time. He was like a little child, helpless in its mother's arms and surrendering itself completely to her -- always conscious of the divine relationship. And when he was near me, I also was transported into a higher spiritual consciousness. I used to play with him, just as Yasoda, the Divine Mother, played with her Divine Child, Krishna."

Rakhali's father tried in many ways to bring his son's mind back to the interests of worldly life. He gave him strict orders not to go to the temple of Dakshineswar. When his advice and threats proved of no avail, he had Rakhali locked in the house. Rakhali longed to go to his master, and Sri Ramakrishna prayed earnestly to the Divine Mother that all the obstacles in Rakhali's spiritual path might be removed.

One day, Ananda Mohan made Rakhali sit beside him in his study while he looked over some legal documents. As soon as Rakhali noticed that his father was deeply absorbed in the work, he seized the opportunity to slip out of the room and hurried off to his master.

Ananda Mohan knew that Rakhali must have gone to Sri Ramakrishna, but for some days he could do nothing, because he had to attend to a law suit in the courts. As soon as he had time, however, he went to Dakshineswar, intending to take his son home. When Rakhali saw his father coming, he was frightened and wanted to hide, but Sri Ramakrishna would not let him. So Rakhali, following his master's advice, went to meet his father and greeting him with unusual affection and reverence. It was then that Ananda Mohan had a change of heart. Instead of insisting on Rakhali's returning home, he simply requested Sri Ramakrishna to send the boy occasionally to him.

II

LIFE WITH RAMAKRISHNA

RAKHALI BEGAN LIVING with the Master at Dakshineswar. One day his young wife came to the temple with her mother. Looking at her Sri Ramakrishna said: "She is born with a divine nature. She will never be an obstacle to Rakhali's spiritual progress." The Master then sent word to the Holy Mother, who was also living at the temple, that she should bless the young girl and welcome her as her daughter-in-law.

After receiving the blessings, the mother and daughter returned home.

Rakhal, with a carefree mind, devoted himself to a contemplative life and the service of his beloved *guru*.

One day, Rakhal told Sri Ramakrishna that he felt very hungry but there was no food in the place. Sri Ramakrishna became greatly concerned. Leaving his room, he went to the bank of the Ganges and shouted: "O Gourdasi, come soon! My Rakhal is hungry!" Shortly after this, Gourdasi, a woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, arrived by boat with a few other disciples, bringing food. Sri Ramakrishna was as happy as a child and called Rakhal, saying: "Here's food, now go and eat. You are very hungry."

Rakhal felt embarrassed and said in a low voice: "Yes, I *am* hungry -- but do you have to advertise it?"

Sri Ramakrishna innocently replied: "If you are hungry, what is wrong in saying so? Go and eat now."

Once, while Rakhal was massaging Sri Ramakrishna with oil, he begged the Master to grant him the power of transcendental vision. At first Sri Ramakrishna took no notice of his request and remained silent. When Rakhal persisted, the Master suddenly turned and spoke to him very harshly. Rakhal felt hurt and angry. He smashed the bottle of oil on the ground and ran away, but, as he reached the gate of the temple, his feet suddenly seemed paralyzed. He could not move another step. Helplessly he sat down on the road, not knowing what to do. Meanwhile Sri Ramakrishna sent his nephew, Ramlal, to find Rakhal and calm his anger. Ramlal fetched Rakhal, who slowly returned to the Master's presence. Sri Ramakrishna looked at him smilingly: " You see! You could not go outside that circle I drew around you!" Rakhal felt ashamed and remained silent. A few moments later, Sri Ramakrishna went into ecstasy and began to speak to the Divine Mother. "O Mother," he murmured, "I know you have given him one-sixteenth part of your power; and that power in him will benefit all mankind."

Then, in the same ecstatic mood, he addressed Rakhal, saying: "You were angry with me. Do you know why I made you angry? There was a purpose in it. Medicine acts only after the sore has been opened." He continued: "Have faith that God is also with form and can e seen in that way. God is revealed to the man who has controlled his mind."

A few days later, while massaging his master's feet, Rakhal suddenly lost his external senses and was transported into that transcendental realm which he had longed to experience. In later years, Sri Ramakrishna used to point out the exact spot in the room where Rakhal went into samadhi for the first time.

Naren (Vivekananda) met Sri Ramakrishna about six months after Rakhal's arrival. Rakhal and Naren were happy to be together again at the feet of their master. But one day Naren was shocked when he saw Rakhal follow Sri Ramakrishna into the temple of Mother Kali and prostrate before the image. He remembered how Rakhal had signed the pledge of the Brahma Samaj, promising not to worship

images or forms of God. At the first opportunity, Naren reminded Rakhhal of his promise and reproached him bitterly for indulging in image-worship. Rakhhal was silent. How could he ever make Naren understand what he had experienced through the master's grace? Yet he could not argue the matter. So, for a few days, Rakhhal avoided Naren, and Naren would not speak to Rakhhal. Sri Ramakrishna noticed this, and when he learned the reason for the quarrel he talked affectionately to Naren and made him realize that Rakhhal was not responsible for the change in his attitude toward images. After that the boys became friends again.

Two years passed away in the holy company of Sri Ramakrishna, during which time Rakhhal lived such an intensely spiritual inner life that he forgot all about his duty to his young wife. Shyama Sundari, his mother-in-law, understood him, however, because of her own devotion to Sri Ramakrishna. Knowing how pure and how devoted to God Rakhhal was, she trained her daughter to be a worthy wife. A neighbor once said to her: "It seems your son-in-law is turning into a monk. Why don't you try to bring his mind back to the world, for your daughter's sake?"

"What can I do?" Shyama Sundari answered. "Everything depends on the will of the Lord. If my son-in-law becomes a monk, I shall regard it as a great blessing."

Soon after this, Shyama Sundari came with her daughter to visit Rakhhal and asked him to return home. The meeting took place in the presence of Sri Ramakrishna, who remained silent throughout. Later, the Master described it to his other disciples and said: "Rakhhal has now reached true spiritual discrimination. I know he will no longer be attached to the world. He has realized the emptiness of earthly pleasures."

The Master felt, however, that Rakhhal had a duty to his wife, and told him to visit her from time to time. Rakhhal obeyed. Gradually, his visits to his wife became longer; he felt concerned about her and her future. Finally he came to Sri Ramakrishna and asked his advice. The Master listened to everything he had to say but refused to tell him definitely which path of life he should follow. With a heavy heart Rakhhal went back to his wife and silently prayed to Sri Ramakrishna to show him the way. Three days passed. Rakhhal prayed unceasingly. Suddenly, a veil was removed from his sight and he saw the *divinemaya* -- the play of the Divine Mother. He knew now which path to choose. He and his wife were not to be bound by the ties of marriage. He had a great mission to fulfill. He was certain, now, that his wife would be taken care of; and, strangely enough, she also felt full of peace. So, taking leave of her, he went straight back to Dakshineswar. The Master knew exactly what had happened. Silently smiling, he welcomed home his beloved spiritual son.

Sri Ramakrishna had known that Rakhhal could not be bound by any earthly attachment. Yet there remained in him a subtle, lingering desire, a desire which could not be completely removed from his heart until it had had some satisfaction. That was why Sri Ramakrishna had sent Rakhhal back to his wife. Now he knew that, henceforward, Rakhhal would be completely free from desire in any form.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "The virtue of truthfulness is most important. If a man always speaks the truth and holds to the truth tenaciously, he will realize God; for God is Truth. I prayed to the Divine Mother, saying: 'Mother, here is knowledge,

here is ignorance -- take them both and give me pure love for you. Here is purity, here is impurity -- take them both and give me pure love for you. Here is good, here is evil -- taken them both and give me pure love for you.' But I could not say, 'Here is truth, here is untruth -- take them both.'

One day, Sri Ramakrishna said to Rakhali: "I can't look at you. I see a veil of ignorance over your face. Tell me, have you done anything wrong?"

Rakhali was greatly troubled. No matter how hard he tried, he could not remember having done any thing wrong. "Try to recall," Sri Ramakrishna said to his disciple, "if you have told any untruth." Rakhali at once remembered and admitted that he had recently told a lie in a joking way to a friend. Sri Ramakrishna forgave him, but said, "Never do it again. To speak the exact truth always is a most important spiritual discipline."

Rakhali's enthusiasm for the spiritual life did not weaken, but after a while he ceased to meditate regularly. Sri Ramakrishna noticed this and asked him the reason. Rakhali answered: "I do not always get the inspiration. My heart seems dry, and I feel and emptiness."

"You must never neglect your meditation on that account," Sri Ramakrishna told him. "Make up your mind to practice spiritual disciplines, then the enthusiasm will come naturally. Those who are farmers by birth and occupation do not and cannot give up farming just because the crops fail. So you must not give up meditation even though you may not get any apparent results. You must be regular in your practice."

That same day, Sri Ramakrishna went as usual to worship in the temple. Rakhali followed him, and sat down to meditate in the hall facing the shrine. Suddenly he saw the shrine grow strangely luminous. The illumination increased in strength until it was as bright as the sun itself, but mellow, not dazzling. This light began to pour through the door of the shrine and seemed about to engulf Rakhali. He was on the verge of losing consciousness. The sensation frightened him. He got up and went out.

Later, Sri Ramakrishna found him sitting silently in his room. "Why did you run away?" the Master asked. "You complain that your heart is dry and you don't have any more spiritual visions, yet you are afraid to experience anything. That's not right."

A few days after this Rakhali was sitting absorbed in meditation in the hall of the temple and experiencing an ecstatic joy. Sri Ramakrishna approached him in ecstasy and gave him a special *mantram* for his own use. "Look," said the Master, "there is your Chosen Ideal!" Rakhali in ecstatic vision saw his chosen aspect of the Godhead standing before him -- living and luminous, with a smile playing on his lips. When Rakhali regained his external consciousness and saw Sri Ramakrishna, he prostrated at his feet with loving devotion. He had known and experienced the divine power and grace of his guru. Sri Ramakrishna returned to his room, and Rakhali became once more absorbed in meditation.

On another occasion, while Rakhhal was meditating, his mind became very dry and restless. All his struggles to calm it were of no avail. Disheartened and disappointed at his own failure, he rose from his seat. Then Sri Ramakrishna came to him and said, "I see an obstacle on your path. Put out your tongue." Rakhhal obeyed. The Master drew some lines on his disciple's tongue with his finger and said: "Now go and meditate." At once Rakhhal found himself freed from his distractions.

During this period, Sri Ramakrishna taught his disciple many kinds of spiritual disciplines, and Rakhhal used to practice them with great earnestness -- but always in privacy and solitude. Often, when Sri Ramakrishna and his devotees were together, a mood of spiritual fervor would come over the whole group. Then Rakhhal would go into ecstasy. Once, at the house of Balaram, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, the devotees were chanting the name of God, and the Master was in samadhi. Rakhhal was in ecstasy, apparently unconscious. When Sri Ramakrishna came out of samadhi, he touched Rakhhal on the heart and thus brought him back to normal consciousness.

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, "M." (a close disciple) records some remarks the Master made about Rakhhal's spiritual condition at this time:

"Rakhhal has grown into a very sweet character now. He practices *japam* unceasingly -- that is the reason you see his lips moving sometimes. When I look at him and notice his mental condition, I often feel inspired and lose myself in ecstasy.

"Naren, Rakhhal, and a few others belong to the class of the 'Ever-perfect.' They are born with God-knowledge. As they begin to grow up, they realize the emptiness of earthly pleasures. The Vedas tell us of a bird called the homa. This bird lives high in the sky: it never comes down to earth. It lays its eggs in mid-air, but at such a great height that the eggs hatch while still falling. The little bird comes out and finds itself dashing down toward the earth. When it sees the ground rushing to meet it, it soars up and rejoins its mother in the sky.

"Boys like Rakhhal resemble the homa. From the earliest childhood they see the emptiness of the world and their one thought is how to reach God."

Sri Ramakrishna also remarked: "Rakhhal at one time became very sensitive to people. He could not bear the sight of those who were worldly-minded. I, too, went through the same mood at one time. Rakhhal had another mood in which he loved to be alone and taste the divine bliss in complete absorption. At such times, he told me, he could not bear even my company. He came here to look after me but while he was passing through this stage I had to look after him."

During this period, Rakhhal had many visions and developed various occult powers. But, following his master's advice he learned to pay no attention to them.

To quote his own words: "While I was with the Master, a man who was living in the temple fell sick. He had no one to look after him, so I nursed him for a few days. One night, when I was sitting beside him, his suffering became intense. I did not know how to help him, so I thought I would repeat the Lord's name and pray for his relief. After I had practiced *japam* for some time, a kind of slumber overcame me. In that state I saw a beautiful young girl, about twelve years old, standing before me. She had the look of a goddess. I asked her: 'Mother, will this man be cured?' She

nodded and answered: 'Yes.' The vision disappeared instantly. Next day, the patient recovered."

Just as the inside of a cupboard can be seen through its glass doors, so Rakhali could see into any man's heart. He was aware of the character and motives of everybody who visited the temple, and would refuse to allow any but sincere, earnest people to enter the Master's presence. Sri Ramakrishna learned that Rakhali possessed this power, and that he was using it. He scolded him severely, saying: 'It is mean to use your power this way. He who pays heed to occult powers cannot live in God-knowledge. Take no notice of such powers when they come to you.'

In later years, a man complained to Swami Sharvananda, a disciple of Maharaj, that they were not really holy men because they did not possess occult powers. When this was reported to Maharaj, he said: "It is easy to acquire occult powers, but hard indeed to attain purity of heart. To find purity of heart is to know the real truth of religion."

There now arose a new obstacle to Rakhali's continuous stay with the Master. He became sick, and was sent to Calcutta to live in the house of Balaram. Sri Ramakrishna wanted Balaram to take particular care of his disciple and told him: "Boys like Naren and Rakhali are born for a divine mission. To serve them is to serve God." Balaram felt very happy to serve his master's spiritual child. But the climate of Calcutta did not agree with Rakhali, so, with the permission of Sri Ramakrishna, Balaram took him to Brindaban for a change of air. At first, Rakhali felt better. He found Brindaban very inspiring and wrote highly of it to "M": "What a wonderful holy place is Brindaban! The wild peacocks are dancing all around. The air is full of singing and dancing and the praises of the Lord. Here you feel an unending joy in the holy Name!" Then he became seriously ill. This troubled the Master. To quote Sri Ramakrishna's own words: "I was extremely worried when I learned of Rakhali's illness at Brindaban. Brindaban is a holy place where Sri Krishna spent his youth. Since Mother revealed to me that Rakhali is the playmate of Sri Krishna and one of the shepherd boys of Brindaban, I was afraid lest he should be reminded of his past incarnation. If he remembered his association with Sri Krishna while at Brindaban, he might give up his body there. Therefore I prayed fervently to the Divine Mother, and she assured me that I had no cause for anxiety."

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna contains this reference to Rakhali's illness:

"Sri Ramakrishna speaks of Rakhali: 'While massaging my feet, Rakhali had his first ecstasy here. A scholar was with me, expounding the Bhagawata. As Rakhali listened to the words of the scripture, he began to feel ecstatic joy. Then he lost consciousness and became absorbed in samadhi.

" He attained samadhi for the second time at Balaram's house. He fell on the ground, apparently unconscious. Rakhali is a devotee of a very high order -- he dwells in the realm of the personal aspect of God. If he hears people talking about the impersonal, he goes out of the room.

" I prayed to the Divine Mother for his recovery. He has renounced everything and he depends entirely on me.

" When he first went to Brindaban, he wrote to M., saying how wonderful the place is and how the

peacocks are dancing around; but now those peacocks seem to hold not charm for him.

" Why do I love these boys so much? Because their hearts are so pure."

When Rakhhal returned from Brindaban, he found that many new disciples had gathered around the Master; among them he saw many of his old school friends. Soon after this, Sri Ramakrishna fell ill and was finally removed to the Cossipore garden house. Rakhhal accompanied him. One after another, several of the young disciples went to live there and look after the Master. It was during this last illness that Sri Ramakrishna established his monastic order, and fired his young disciples with the ideal of renunciation. He began to train each one individually, according to his character and temperament. To some he gave the *gerua* cloth, which symbolizes the life of renunciation. Naren and Rakhhal were among these chosen few.

The Master was undoubtedly a very sick man, but he still remained the source and center of a strong spiritual current which transformed the lives and characters of those around him. The Cossipore garden house became a place of bliss, and the disciples hearts overflowed with joy in God.

It was during this period that Sri Ramakrishna prepared Naren to deliver his message to mankind. He taught him how to train the young disciples and organize the monastic order. Every day he would talk to Naren for hours together. In the course of the conversation he told him: "Rakhhal has the keen intelligence of a king. If he chose, he could rule a kingdom." Taking the hint and understanding that the Master wanted Rakhhal to be their leader, Naren lost no time in bringing this about. One day, when all the young disciples were seated together, Naren spoke of Rakhhal's greatness and announced: "From today, we shall call Rakhhal our king." The others gladly agreed, knowing the special love with the master had for Rakhhal. Thus, from that day, they called him Raja, the king. Later on, both disciples and devotees began to call him "Maharaj." When Sri Ramakrishna heard Rakhhal's new name, he joyfully approved.

He knew that his mission had been fulfilled, so, leaving his earthly body, he merged himself in the Divine Mother. On the 15th of August, 1886, the Master passed into *mahasamadhi*, the highest state of super-consciousness.

III

AS A YOUNG MONK

WHILE THE MASTER was still with them, the young disciples had lived in an atmosphere of continual joy and festivity. They were walking the path of God, who is infinite Being, infinite Wisdom, and infinite Bliss. They tasted the delight of their master's presence; and neither the anxieties of the world nor its pleasures and excitement could touch their hearts. "Live in union with Brahman and spread the joy of Brahman all around you." That was the truth the disciples had learned.

In the Gospel according to St. Matthew (IX:15) we read: "And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with

them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast."

Sri Ramakrishna was taken away from them and they felt a void, an emptiness. The Master had, as it were, lighted the candles within their hearts with a torch of blazing fire. Now that the torch had gone, they were conscious of darkness. Their own candles still burned; but they were not enough. They wanted the blazing torch. They wanted to be merged in that blissful consciousness once and for evermore.

Guided by an invisible hand, thirsting for God and fired with the ideal of renunciation, the young disciples gathered together and formed the Ramakrishna Monastic Order at Baranagore.

Naren was the center and heart of this group. Under his guidance the young disciples engaged themselves in study, discussion, and religious practices. Rakhhal was put in charge of the monastery and made responsible for its general welfare. Naren and Rakhhal loved and respected each other deeply. Once, a young member of the group felt discouraged and wished to leave. Rakhhal said to him: "Why do you want to run away? There is such a wonderful atmosphere here. Where else would you find a holy man like Naren? And where else would find such love as Naren has for us?"

Although some members of the new monastery had already received the gerua cloth from their master, they now followed Naren's suggestion and went through the formal ritual of sannyas -- the taking of the monastic vow. Naren became known as Swami Vivekananda, and Rakhhal as Swami Brahmananda.

The disciples now devoted themselves wholeheartedly to spiritual practices. Some days they had nothing to eat; and always their meals were scarce. Their only thought was of God, and in this thought they would remain absorbed almost continuously for days and nights on end.

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, "M." records the following conversation with Rakhhal in the garden of the Baranagore Monastery:

Rakhhal: "Don't waste any more time. Plunge deep into spiritual practices.

"Why have we renounced the world? Some people say if you have failed to realize God, why not go back to the world? But Naren gives the right answer: 'Because we could not find Ram, must we live with Shyam and beget children?' Ah, Naren speaks wise words!"

M.: "What you say is true. I can see that you are filled with a great spiritual longing."

Rakhhal: "How can I describe the state of my mind? This noon I felt a yearning to go to Narmada and practice austerity. Nothing can be achieved without diving deep into meditation. The outside world is full of distractions. Even Sukadeva, the pure and everfree one, was afraid of distractions of the world."

M.: "Yes, the Yogopanishad describes how Sukadeva renounced the world -- the realm of Maya. It also related a conversation between Sukadeva and his father, Vyasa. Vyasa advises him to find God while living his life in the world. Sukadeva answers: 'The only truth is God.' He saw the emptiness of

life in the world, the vanity of lust and greed."

Rakhal: "Many people mistakenly imagine that it is enough if one avoids the company of women, but Naren expressed the truth beautifully last night. He said: 'Woman exists for man as long as he has lust. When you are free from lust you do not see any difference between the sexes.' "

M.: "That is true. Children do not see the difference in sex."

Rakhal: "That is why I believe we must plunge deep within. To reach enlightenment a man must transcend Maya, the domain of lust and greed."

Most of the young disciples wanted to retire into complete solitude and live absorbed in God. The divine touch of their master had already enabled them to experience the transcendental state. What they had attained only now and then through his grace, they wished to win as a permanent possession of their own efforts. They wanted to live utterly in that consciousness. We find Swami Brahmananda eager to go into solitude, live on alms, and dwell constantly in union with Brahman.

Maharaj talked to Swamiji (as Vivekananda was usually called) about his intention of living for some time as a wandering monk, surrendering himself completely to God. Swamiji agreed, but suggested that Swami Subodhananda go with him and look after him. Because of his deep love for Maharaj, Swamiji was always concerned for his welfare, and wished him to have someone who would minister to his comforts. Maharaj could not refuse his brother's wish, so he and Swami Subodhananda left together for Benares. They stayed there a month. From Benares they went on to the temple of Omkarnath, situated on the bank of the Narmada. Here, amidst charming natural surroundings, Maharaj lived continuously in *nirvikalpa samadhi* for six days and six nights, completely unconscious of the outside world. When at last he came back to normal consciousness, his face shone with a heavenly joy. He had experienced God in the impersonal, absolute aspect, and had realized the identity of the *Atman* with Brahman.

The two Swamis continued their journey and reached Panchavati by the river Godavari where Sita and Rama are traditionally supposed to have lived during their exile. There is a temple dedicated to them. Here, Brahmananda felt and saw the living presence of these two divine incarnations; while chanting the Holy Name, he became absorbed in samadhi for three days and three nights.

During these periods, Swami Subodhananda used to watch over Maharaj with mingled joy and anxiety. He realized the danger that Maharaj might pass out of the body while in samadhi and not return to earthly life, and he was always careful to prevent this.

From Panchavati, they went on to Dwaraka, the well-known place of pilgrimage, situated on the bank of the sacred river Gomati. In this river pilgrims bathe in order to acquire merit, paying a tax for the privilege. But neither Maharaj nor Subodhananda had any money. A rich merchant noticed this and, recognizing them as holy men, offered to pay their tax, but Maharaj refused. He did not wish to buy religious merit and preferred to take his bath in the nearby ocean. This impressed the merchant so much that he also refused to pay the tax and went to bathe with the two

Swamis. He invited them to his residence and entertained them for three days, but when he offered them money for their further travels, Maharaj refused to accept it. The merchant then offered to give them letters of introduction to his agents in different parts of the country so that their comfort would be assured wherever they went. But Maharaj refused this offer also. 'I need nothing from anybody,' he said. 'The Lord is my only refuge! He will look after us.' The merchant then gave him a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita which was gladly accepted.

From Dwaraka they visited various places of pilgrimage and finally reached Brindaban. During this second visit to the holy city, Maharaj wrote Balaram the following letter:

"Who can fathom the workings of God? Who could know His divine play? Man remains subject to happiness and misery as long as he is bound by *karma*. This is the lot of everyman -- no matter whether he is learned or ignorant, good or wicked. Rare indeed is he who has attained unalloyed bliss! Only that man who is free from all cravings can find unending joy.

"There is more misery than happiness in this world. Most people live in misery. God the Father is loving and kind. Who can explain why His children suffer?

"Man suffers because of his ignorance. This ignorance is his sense of ego. When a man is free from this egoism, surrendering his life, his mind, and his intellect at the blessed feet of the Lord of all, renouncing all that he calls his own -- then is he blessed indeed. That man alone is truly happy.

"Of himself, man can accomplish nothing. There is only one thing to be done: Pray to God and pray unceasingly. Thus we may forget the ego altogether and continually remember that God alone is real, that God alone is the Truth. Then only can we be freed from ignorance.

"Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'How many love God as they love their own kith and kin? How many even want to love him?'

"The mind is created out of those three *gunas* which also make up the outer world. Because of this the mind finds delight in dwelling on worldly thoughts. This is the very nature and stuff of the mind. It is only through the divine grace that a man can withdraw his mind from the external world and keep it fixed on God's holy feet.

"I pray to the Lord that I may be completely freed from consciousness of the physical world. Bless me, that I may remain absorbed in the Lotus Feet of the guru -- that is the one desire of my heart."

Here in Brindavan, Brahmananda lived in a state of continuous ecstasy, almost entirely losing his consciousness of the physical world. His brother disciple lovingly watched over him, but Brahmananda rarely spoke to him; his mind dwelt constantly in another realm. Subodhananda would beg food for him from door to door, and place it silently in a corner of his brother's cell. At a regular hour, Brahmananda would rise from meditation in order to eat something, but if Subodhananda was late and he did not find the food in the usual place, he did not mind. He simply returned to his meditation and ate nothing until the next day. Sometimes Subodhananda would collect a rather more luxurious meal, with curries of various kinds, but he noticed that Brahmananda satisfied his hunger from one of the dishes and left the rest untouched. He did this not because he was deliberately practicing any austerity or mortification of the flesh, but because he was so completely absorbed in the thought of God that the taste for food or any other sense-object had left him. He ate

only to keep the body alive. In later years Maharaj used to say: "It is easy to practice austerity by not allowing the mind to come into contact with sense-objects, but it is hard to get rid of the mental craving itself. And of all cravings the subtle desire of the organ of taste is the most difficult to overcome. A man loses this craving only when he is in a high spiritual state."

Seeing Maharaj thus absorbed in contemplation and neglecting food and sleep, Subodhananda one day asked him: "Why do you live so strictly? You are the spiritual son of God Incarnate; he has already done everything for you. Through his grace you have attained samadhi. Then why do you still have to sit like a beggar, begging for the Lord's grace?"

"What you say is true," Maharaj answered. "The Master did everything for us. But still I find a lack within. This proves that we need repeated practice in order to make the state of samadhi natural and habitual to us. You know Uddhava was a devoted disciple and friend of Sri Krishna; through his grace he realized God. And yet Sri Krishna sent him to the Himalayas to live in solitude and contemplation."

Bijoy Krishna Goswami, a well-known saint who was living in Brindavan at this time, asked Brahmananda the same question. He replied simply: "I am only trying to become established in that vision of God which I received through my master's grace." Bijoy Krishna and Maharaj would often meet and talk together about God.

In time, Subodhananda himself became eager to live in solitude and practice austerities. So, with the blessings and permissions of Maharaj, he went to Haridwar at the foot of the Himalayas.

Left alone in Brindavan, Maharaj had no time to feel lonely, for again he plunged into the consciousness of God. Suddenly, one day, he saw in a vision the shining form of his devoted brother-disciple Balaram standing before him. On his face was a heavenly smile. Gradually his form merged into the light of the divine realm. Next day, Maharaj received the news that Balaram had passed away. At first he felt a pang of grief, for he loved Balaram dearly; then he realized that this sorrow also was a form of attachment. More strongly than ever he felt a desire to forget the things of the world and plunge deeply into the inner kingdom of God. He left Brindavan and began to walk towards Haridwar.

At Haridwar, Maharaj was overwhelmed by the grandeur and beauty of the Himalayas and of the Ganges running its course at their feet. Two miles from Haridwar is the quiet little village of Kankhal, sanctified by the presence of many monks belonging to various orders, who go there to lead contemplative lives. There Maharaj settled in a little hut not far from the Ganges. The present Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service is now situated on that very spot.

Swamis Vivekananda, Turiyananda, Saradananda, Subodhananda and other monastic disciples of the Master were there leading contemplative lives at Hrishikesh, in the same neighborhood. It was not long before they learned that Brahmananda was at Kankhal and they all went to visit him. Vivekananda wanted to go to Delhi and asked Maharaj and the rest of his brother-disciples to accompany

him. Maharaj could not refuse any wish of Swamiji's, but first he wanted to visit Swami Akhandananda, another brother-disciple, who was living in Meerut. To Meerut, therefore, they all went and spent some memorable days in meditation and study, happy to be in one another's company. Then Swamiji left for Delhi alone; the rest of them followed later.

The lives of holy men, and especially their travels, must often appear curiously aimless to the ordinary observer. Ever obedient to the voice of God within them, they make no fixed plans as worldly people do. All their intentions are subject to unexpected change. No sooner were the Swamis gathered in Delhi than Vivekananda told them that he must go on alone. The inner voice commanded him to seek solitude. "We shall meet again when the Lord wills," he told his brothers as he said good-bye.

Maharaj now asked Swami Turiyananda to accompany him on his pilgrimage. The Swami readily agreed, which pleased Maharaj very much, for Sri Ramakrishna had once told him to "keep company with brother Hari."

In Hari (Turiyananda), devotion and knowledge were harmoniously developed. Deeply learned in the scriptures, he lived a life of great austerity and immaculate purity. Sri Ramakrishna used to speak of him as a man of renunciation, strictly embodying the idea of the Gita.

The two Swamis now traveled together, mostly on foot, and visited many sacred temples in the northern part of India. Turiyananda has told us that whenever Maharaj entered any shrine he would be filled with ecstatic devotion for that particular aspect of God to which the temple was dedicated, and that, ultimately he would have direct vision of the living deity within that temple. In later years, when Maharaj was asked by a disciple if the gods and goddesses were real, he answered: "The one Godhead has many spiritual forms. All these forms are real. A seer can see them and talk to them."

After nearly two years of pilgrimage, the Swamis arrived in Bombay. There they met Kalipada Ghosh, a devoted disciple of the Master, who lived in the city. A joyful surprise awaited them, for at Kalipada's house was Swamiji himself. Since the parting at Delhi, they had known nothing of his whereabouts. Swamiji was now preparing for his first journey to the United States of America. Before embarking he was requested to go and bless the newborn prince of Khetri. Brahmananda and Turiyananda went with him on the train as far as the Abu Road station. While Vivekananda was with the prince, they visited Mt. Abu, where there is a beautiful Jain temple. A few days later they returned to the station in time to exchange a few words with Swamiji as his train passed through. This meeting was very short. Swamiji hastily told Turiyananda: "Please go back to the Baranagore Monastery. You are wanted there. Let Raja live alone."

Turiyananda had no time to explain to Swamiji that he could not leave Maharaj alone just then. Brahmananda's spiritual consciousness was turned so high that he had no regard for his body and could not look after it. So they remained together and the two of them returned to Mt. Abu, where they lived a life of contemplation.

Turiyananda begged food for this brother and watched over him just as Subodhananda had done.

After some time, Maharaj felt that they should return to Brindavan. Here Turiyananda experienced a mood of ecstatic joy. "I am not going to beg any food today," he told Maharaj: "Let us see if Radha (the Holy Mother of Brindavan) will feed us." They sat down to meditate. Day and night passed for both in blissful absorption, without any consciousness of hunger or thirst. Next morning, as they rose from their meditation, they saw a devotee approaching them with quantities of food. By this time they were both hungry and ate with great relish.

After a few days in Brindavan, they went to Lake Kusum, a solitary place near the holy city. On the lake shore there are huts where monks can pass their days in solitude and contemplation. There the Swamis lived for some months, completely forgetting the outer world.

Swami Turiyananda told me of an interesting experience Maharaj had at Lake Kusum. For several nights in succession, as he sat down to meditate, he was disturbed by peculiar noises and by the falling of pebbles and dust around him. At length Maharaj saw the spirit of a dead man standing before him. "Why are you disturbing me like this?" he asked. The spirit admitted that he had been trying too attract the Swami's attention, and begged Maharaj to liberate him from his pitiful condition. Maharaj replied that he did not know how to do this. "You are a holy man," the spirit told him: "If you will just pray for my release, I shall be liberated." Maharaj did as he was asked.

During his stay at Lake Kusum, Maharaj had the habit of rising at midnight and spending the rest of the night in meditation. One night, however, he felt tired and overslept. After a while, someone gave him a push and aroused him. At first he thought that this must be Swami Turiyananda; then he saw a luminous figure, in the dress of a Vaishnava saint, standing beside him and counting his beads. After this, the figure appeared almost every night, at midnight and joined him in his meditation. Later, in describing this incident to his disciples, Maharaj remarked: "Many holy men, after leaving the physical body, live in subtle, spiritual bodies, and help earnest religious aspirants in different ways."

Towards the end of the year 1893, Turiyananda received a letter from a brother-disciple, describing Swamiji's success in America and requesting him to come back to the monastery, which had now been moved from Baranagore to Alambazar. Turiyananda read the contents of the letter to Maharaj and asked for his advice. Maharaj agreed that he ought to return. "Don't trouble about me," he said, "Go back to the monastery. You are needed there to do the work of the Lord."

So Turiyananda unwillingly took his departure and Maharaj remained alone a year in Brindaban. During this period, he sometimes took a vow not to ask for food or other necessities of life from anyone. Generally an unknown devotee brought food to his door, but sometimes there would be days when he had nothing. Once, while he was sitting in silence, a stranger laid a warm new blanket beside him. A few moments later another stranger came by and took the blanket away. Maharaj sat still,

smiling to himself as he watched the strange play of the Divine Mother.

During the special festivities in memory of Sri Krishna, Brahmananda joined the devotees at a nearby temple. The crowd was chanting the name of God and singing Krishna's praises before the shrine. An aged holy man of the Vaishnava sect was sitting in one corner, counting his beads. Suddenly he turned towards Maharaj and beckoned him to approach, indicating with affectionate gestures that he should sit down beside him. The two began to meditate; as Maharaj became absorbed, he felt the Vaishnava touch his head with his beads. He did this repeatedly and each time, as Brahmananda received the saint's touch, the hair on his body stood on end and he experienced an ecstatic joy.

By constant practice throughout these years of pilgrimage, Maharaj had at last achieved his aim. The state of samadhi was not his own possession. He had won it for himself and he dwelt in it continually. Even in the periods of his normal consciousness, there was, as he said, "a fullness of God" in his heart. All around him, wherever he went, nature seemed to vibrate with joy. Established at last and forever in the consciousness of God, he felt ready to answer the call of worldly duty. One day, quite suddenly, he left for Calcutta, carrying that heavenly joy within his heart.

IV

PRESIDENT OF THE ORDER

THE RETURN OF MAHARAJ to Calcutta created a stir among his brother-disciples. His presence brought to them a new upsurge of spiritual joy. One day he told Swami Premananda: "I was very happy in Brindaban, but I left the holy city to come and live in the monastery here. I want to serve my brothers and mankind. Our master, Sri Ramakrishna, was the embodiment of supreme love and devotion; so that our own lives must be such that people all over the world, burdened by earthly sufferings and miseries may learn to take his holy name and in him find rest and peace.

When Swamiji, who was still in America, heard of Brahmananda's return to Calcutta, he felt relieved of any further anxiety regarding the conduct of the Ramakrishna Order in India. His letters to Maharaj were full of the spirit of universal service; and Maharaj, in his turn, would inspire his brother disciples with the same ideal. All felt an unbounded confidence in Swamiji and Maharaj; but the love of these two for each other was so deep and so spiritual that no one else could fully understand it. Two years after Brahmananda's return from Brindaban, Swamiji came back from America. A public reception was prepared for him at a house in Calcutta, and Maharaj himself was the first to welcome his brother, placing a garland of flowers around his neck. Swamiji in turn, touched the feet of Maharaj, quoting a saying from the scriptures: "The son of a guru is to be regarded as the guru himself," (meaning that Brahmananda was the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna). Smiling sweetly, Maharaj touched his feet and returned the compliment with another quotation: "One's elder brother is to be respected like one's father."

Swamiji was then taken to the Alambazar Monastery. Here he placed in

Brahmananda's hands all the money which American devotees had subscribed towards the Indian Mission. "All this time," he said, "I have been acting as a trustee. It is a relief to give this back to its real owner -- our Raja."

The natures of the two friends were widely dissimilar, and yet, in a sense, complimentary. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna: "Naren dwells in the realm of the absolute, the impersonal. He is like a sharp, drawn sword of discrimination. Rakhhal dwells in the realm of God, the Sweet One, the repository of all blessed qualities. He is like a child on the lap of his mother, completely surrendering himself to her in every way."

Vivekananda was like the flaming fire, the midday sun -- burning up all evil and impurity. Brahmananda was like a soft, cool light, soothing the aching heart. Vivekananda was like the deep and restless ocean - always fighting against ignorance and superstition. Brahmananda was like the blue sky, vast and patient in spirit. The manner of his working was inward and silent.

Vivekananda laid the foundation for the spiritual undertaking entrusted to him by his master: Brahmananda built the edifice. Vivekananda, with his dynamic, aggressive personality, could wake a man from the sleep of ignorance: Brahmananda with his characteristic serenity could show him the way to mould his life in God.

Each paid memorable tribute to the other. "Through Swamiji," said Brahmananda, "the world has come to know of Sri Ramakrishna. But for him, very few could have understood our master's genius." And in the words of Swamiji: "Raja is the greatest treasure house of spirituality." Once a European devotee came to visit Swamiji in the monastery, wishing to have his spiritual problems solved. Swamiji sent him to Maharaj, saying: "There you will find a dynamo working, and we are all under him." After talking to Maharaj, the devotee expressed his gratitude and told Swamiji that all his doubts had been removed.

Swami Saradananda rightly remarks: "If Swami Vivekananda was loved and cherished by the Master as the means by which his spiritual mission was to be proclaimed to the world, Swami Brahmananda was no less valued by him as the future head of his organization."

We have already described how, before visiting America, Swamiji had spent more than two years as a wandering monk, traveling the length and breadth of India. It was at this time that he came to understand the inner source of his country's strength, for he saw how the masses, in spite of their miserable poverty and lack of education, with all their accompanying evils, still held fast to the ancient ideals of religious life. Swamiji's heart thrilled with pride in his country's spiritual greatness, and bled for its material distress. When he came to the West, he found the picture exactly reversed. On the one hand, physical comfort, material prosperity, high standards of education, all the achievements of the human intellect; on the other hand, spiritual poverty, and a failure to understand life's only purpose -- the unfoldment of the God within man. He saw, in short, that the West had failed to accept wholeheartedly the ideals of Jesus Christ. The perfect civilization, Swamiji realized, consists in blending and harmonizing the genius of the East with that of the West. Expressed philosophically,

it is the blending of the active with the contemplative life.

When Swamiji returned to India, he talked to his brother-disciples, giving a new expression to the ideals for which Sri Ramakrishna had stood. It is not enough, he said, to devote your entire life to the realization of God for yourself alone. You must also live "for the good of all, for the happiness of all." Swamiji wished his brothers to combine the contemplative life with the life of service to mankind. Brahmananda was the first to recognize the depth and scope of Swamiji's ideals, and he gave them his full support.

On the first day of May 1897, Swamiji called a representative meeting of the monastic and lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. At this meeting, the organization known as the Ramakrishna Mission was formed. Maharaj was elected the president of the Calcutta Center. Later, early in 1902, before the passing away of Swamiji, he was made head of the Order, and he held that office for more than twenty years, until his own death. The phenomenal growth of the Mission during his lifetime is too well known to need recording here. Whenever India has suffered any great flood or famine or other calamity, the monks of the Ramakrishna Order have come forward to relieve the distress of the people. Besides its innumerable emergency relief stations, opened temporarily, it has established permanent charitable and religious institutions all over the country. Preaching centers and monasteries have been opened in Europe and North and South America. At the beginning of 1899, the permanent headquarters of the Mission were established at Belur on the Ganges, now well known as the Belur Math.

Foreign visitors to India have spoken highly in appreciation of the Mission's success in social service. To the monks of the Order, however, such success can be only of secondary importance. Maharaj always insisted on this: "The one purpose of life is to know God. Plunge deep into the sea of bliss and become immortals. Attain knowledge and devotion, then serve God in mankind. Work is not the end of life. Disinterested work is a means of attaining devotion. Meditate, meditate, and dive deep within. Know that God alone is real. Keep at least three-fourths of your mind in God. It is enough if you give one-fourth to service. Work and worship."

A young disciple of Swamiji, inspired by his ideals of renunciation and service, devoted himself to nursing the sick and helping the poor. From a very humble beginning, his work grew into a huge organization. For many years this disciple was the head of one of the largest homes of service in India under the Ramakrishna Mission. But when Maharaj saw that his work was becoming more important to him than his spiritual life, he relieved him of his post, inspired him with the ideal of realizing God, and sent him away to live a life of exclusive meditation.

To quote Maharaj again: "Yes, you must work. But I insist that you devote yourselves to spiritual practices and meditation. Even though I may not ask you to work, your nature will force you to work. It is difficult to engage the mind in contemplation of God; but you are monks, therefore work must not be the sole purpose of your lives."

At one time, a millionaire who had lost his wife came to the monastery and said

he wished to renounce the world and give all his wealth to the Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Premananda reported this to Maharaj, who folded his hands and said gently: "Brother, a worldly man who associates with a holy man like yourself naturally becomes inspired by the ideal of renunciation. Shall we in our turn become worldly, because we have met a worldly man?" Maharaj refused to accept the money, because he knew very well that the millionaire would later regret his offer, being, as he was, very much attached to his wealth.

In the same way, he refused to accept a gift of real estate, knowing that the emotion which prompted the offer was merely temporary. He realized that the work of the Mission could not prosper unless it was founded on a firm spiritual basis.

Maharaj was more interested in the spiritual growth of his disciples than in their efficiency. He once reprimanded a senior disciple who had been put in charge of a younger brother, saying: "Did I send the young boy to you to make a good clerk out of him?" On another occasion, when a senior disciple of Swamiji was taking one of the younger disciples to task for negligence in some duty, Maharaj overheard the conversation and told him: "Of course, it is wrong if this young man neglects his allotted duty. You have the right to scold him for that. But tell me, do you ever inquire if he is doing his duty to himself? Do you ask him if he is meditating regularly or if he has any difficulties in his progress towards God? Is the work of the Mission more important to you than this boy's spiritual growth?"

Maharaj placed special importance on what he called *sahaja yoga*, which means the easy way to attain the knowledge of God. And that is constant recollectedness. He used to say: "Make japam. Repeat the name of the Lord. Whatever you do, let the name of God flow like a current within you."

While it is true that Maharaj held the ideal of selfless service, of serving God in man to be a form of worship, he also pointed out that without the practice of meditation it is hard to do work as worship and that it is utterly impossible to annihilate the ego simply by actions, however selfless they may be. We must act but we must also try by our meditation to merge the ego in God.

Jesus said: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." But to really love mankind an aspirant must also learn to love God with all his heart, his soul, and his mind. Maharaj once told me: "My boy, devote yourself to spiritual practices. Attain knowledge and devotion. Then you will see how your heart will overflow with love and sympathy for mankind. You will also find out how unnecessary is man's suffering, carrying as he does this mine of bliss within himself."

Maharaj kept a watchful eye on the progress of each member of the Order. He turned our hearts continually towards God and directed our actions and the activities of the Mission toward the integrating of that inner strength which alone can benefit mankind physically, morally, and spiritually.

When young men of varied temperaments live together, it is only natural that misunderstandings will arise from time to time, no matter how high their common ideal may be. In one of the monasteries, connected with a home of service, there

were a number of young untrained members, newly arrived from school and college. When they had been together a while, their old tendencies began to reassert themselves: they formed rival groups and started to quarrel. A senior swami of the Order went to investigate. After questioning somebody he soon found out who were the ringleaders. He then wrote to Swami Brahmananda telling him that some of those boys were unfit for monastic life, and should be expelled. Maharaj replied: "Don't do anything. I am coming to see for myself."

When Maharaj arrived, he asked no questions. He lived quietly in the monastery, insisting only on one thing: that all the boys should meditate regularly in his presence. Then he began to instruct them, making no distinction between the good and the bad. Gradually the whole atmosphere of the place improved. The boys forgot their quarrels because they no longer had any time for them. And when Maharaj left, two or three months later, perfect harmony had been restored in the monastery. Nobody had been expelled. All the boys had become better and more spiritual.

At another time, two young monks quarreled and came to blows. Swami Premananda heard of it and went anxiously to Maharaj, saying: "Maharaj, we brother-disciples have lived together in peace and harmony for many years. Never have we fought and quarreled; never has a harsh word been spoken among us. What shall we do with these boys? Ought we to expel them?"

"Brother," Swami Brahmananda answered gently, "it is true that they have been making trouble, but remember also that they came here to take refuge at the blessed feet of Sri Ramakrishna. They look to you for counsel and guidance. Surely you can do something to transform their lives and bring love into their hearts."

"You are right," Swami Premananda replied, "they have taken refuge here; but, brother, it is you who must bless them and transform them."

Then Swami Premananda gathered the monks together, seniors and novices alike, and led them in a procession to Maharaj. With folded hands the Swami asked Maharaj to bless them all. As he spoke, Maharaj entered into an exalted spiritual mood. He became deeply absorbed, and his right hand was raised in benediction.

Seeing this, Swami Premananda asked Swami Shuddhananda, a senior disciple of Swamiji, to prostrate before Maharaj and receive his blessing. Thereupon, every monk and every initiate followed his example, and Maharaj touched the head of each with his uplifted hand. Speaking from my own experience, I can only say that that touch was like a cooling spring to a fevered body. It gave one an inner exaltation which could be felt but not described. All our troubles were forgotten and our hearts were full of love.

"Keep your mind as high as the mountains," Maharaj told a disciple whom he was sending to a monastery in the Himalayas. He himself lived always in an exalted state of consciousness, which subtly transformed the lives and characters of those around him. If the spiritual life is intensified, the outer life will adjust itself automatically; this principle applies equally to the life of an organization. Maharaj was once asked to make some new rules for the guidance of the young monks. He replied: "Swamiji

has already made our rules for us. We do not need any new ones. Add more love, attain more devotion and help others to move toward the ideal of God."

As the network of monasteries and homes of service spread over India, Maharaj began to visit them staying a few months at each place. He inspired everyone by his presence, and an air of festivity prevailed everywhere he went. Once, in speaking of him, Swami Turiyananda quoted a verse from the Bhagavatam, "Those who realize the eternal presence of the Lord in their hearts are endowed with goodness and beauty, and their lives are a perpetual festivity of joy." Then he added: "Maharaj carries with him such an intense spiritual atmosphere that whoever comes within his orbit is carried toward God as if by a spiritual current and is filled with divine joy. Once a professor who had lived for a week in the monastery which Maharaj was visiting said to me: "I don't know what kind of boys you are, but if you live in the rarefied atmosphere of Maharaj, day after day, you must be great. I myself cannot stand it for long; I need to breathe a little worldly air." However, after this, the professor could not breathe his worldly air for long. Maharaj had given him a taste of the joy of God. Soon afterwards he came back and joined the Order.

Though Maharaj could not be in all the centers at once or live with all his disciples, he kept a watchful eye on everybody. One day he said to me: "Do you think I don't know what you boys have been doing and how you have been faring in the path to God? I may say in one place and seem unconcerned, but I know what is happening to each one of you. I even know what ... is doing in America." Maharaj possessed this knowledge not through the ordinary means of communication, but through extraordinary powers. Moreover, he was not satisfied with merely knowing: he sent spiritual aid to every one in need.

If a member of the Order should be guilty of some serious offense and there would be talk of his expulsion, Maharaj would forgive his misdeeds and transform him by his touch. He used to say: "The sins of many births can be wiped out in a moment by one glance from the gracious eye of God." Once he said to me: "What is morality? If one acquires devotion to God, morality and purity will follow without one even trying to be moral or pure."

"Practice, practice," he would tell us: "Through practice of the spiritual disciplines the heart will be purified and a new realm will open. You will realize that God alone is real and that everything else is unreal. But when through japam and meditation a little awakening comes, do not imagine you have achieved the end. Light ! More Light ! Onward ! Onward ! Attain God ! Gain His Vision ! Talk to Him !"

The success of a religious body depends, not on its external achievements, its efficient organization, its buildings, the size of its membership or its philanthropic activities -- but upon the inner life of each of its members and the measure of their progress toward devotion and knowledge of God. This is the truth that Maharaj, as head of the Order, impressed indelibly upon our minds.

MAHARAJ AS GURU

SRI RAMAKRISHNA ONCE SAID: "When the lotus blooms, bees come of their own accord to gather the honey. When the lotus of a man's heart blossoms in the joy of God, spiritual aspirants will swarm to him." Many times we have watched Maharaj sitting among a crowd of devotees. One moment, he would be as happy and playful as a child; then suddenly his mind would become indrawn and the whole atmosphere would vibrate with the presence of God. At such times, those who had come to visit him would find that all their doubts and problems had been solved. They would rise and leave his presence, exalted and comforted, though not a single word had been spoken.

The monastic order included many disciples of Holy Mother and Swamiji. But most of these had little opportunity of associating with their gurus. Swamiji passed away in 1902, and because Holy Mother did not live at the monastery she instructed her disciples to follow the disciplines prescribed by Maharaj. Maharaj himself also accepted disciples, but at first he was very particular. Often he would initiate them only after many years of probation. During the ceremony of initiation, he would be filled with an ecstasy of love, and the disciple would feel an extraordinary sense of the divine presence.

Holy Mother once complained that Maharaj did not accept enough disciples. It so happened that just then Maharaj was invited to see a play about the life of Ramanuja, which had been written by one of his own disciples. In this drama there is a scene which expresses Ramanuja's great love for mankind. The action is as follows:

Ramanuja's guru initiates him with a sacred mantram, and warns him never to reveal it to anyone. "What will happen if I do?" Ramanuja asks. And his guru replies: "Whoever hears this mantram will be liberated from the bondage of his ignorance, but you yourself will suffer damnation." Ramanuja goes at once into the temple, gathers a crowd around him and utters the sacred mantram in the hearing of all. His guru pretends to be very angry, and rebukes him for disobedience. Ramanuja answers: "If my damnation can liberate so many people, then my supreme desire is to be damned." The guru is delighted. "You are great indeed!" he exclaims. "I give you my blessing." And he declares that the philosophy of qualified monism is to be known in the future as the Ramanuja philosophy.

This drama and Holy Mother's remark both made a deep impression upon Maharaj. After this, he initiated many more disciples.

Maharaj recognized his future disciples at first sight, and bound them to him at once with an indescribable love. Even as he met them, he knew which spiritual path each should follow. Two young college boys came to visit him. To one of them he said jokingly: "Let me see your palm." As he looked at it, he remarked: "You have a tendency toward worldly enjoyments. But, by the Lord's grace, you may be able to overcome it." Swami Premananda, who was present, asked Maharaj to look at the other boy's hand also. He replied, smiling: "I don't need to." Hearing this, the other boy (who was later to be known as Swami Yatiswarananda) felt sad. He thought: "My friend has some chance of becoming a monk, but I have none." A few days later, he came alone to visit Maharaj at the Belur Monastery. He met Swami

Brahmananda's personal attendant, who told him: "Maharaj said that you would become a monk." And indeed, he did; a few years later he became a monk, while the other boy married but remained a devotee.

Before Yatiswarananda became a monk, Maharaj told him: "Give your body and mind to worldly enjoyments, and the world will destroy them both. Devote them to God and His service, and you will enjoy bodily health, peace of mind, and spiritual joy."

The following is Yatiswarananda's own description of his initiation: "The day Maharaj was to initiate me, I felt a spiritual power tangibly emanating from him. After the initiation, I bowed down to him. He raised his hand in benediction above my head, giving me instantly a vivid consciousness of an immanent Presence. I realized that the whole universe was merged in the presence. That day, also, I got a glimpse of the divine nature and power of the guru. I was literally transported into a new life, and the power that he transmitted to me that day is still working with me."

There are some instances of persons receiving initiation from Maharaj in a dream. This has happened even when the dreamer had never seen him in the flesh, but had merely heard about him and felt attracted by his name. One devout young woman had such a dream, and went to see Maharaj to confirm it. Although he was seated among his brother disciples, she recognized Maharaj at first sight, and began to describe her experience. Just as she was about to repeat the mantram she had received in her dream, Maharaj stopped her. "Don't tell me," he said, "I will tell you what it was." Thus she was convinced of the truth of her vision.

A young boy also received a mantram from Maharaj in a dream, but unfortunately forgot it when he awoke. Shortly afterwards he went to Maharaj for initiation. During the ceremony, the dream-mantram returned to his mind, so that he was delighted and surprised, when, a few moments later, Maharaj gave him that very same mantram.

At one time Sri Ramakrishna appeared in a dream to two ladies belonging to an aristocratic family, and told them to visit Maharaj. They had never heard of Sri Ramakrishna, nor read anything about him. But they went to Maharaj and were initiated by him. After relating this incident, Maharaj remarked to me: "You see, we think we have to preach the Lord and his message; but Sri Ramakrishna does his own preaching. Be the witness!"

Girish Chandra Ghosh, the famous Bengali dramatist who became a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, tells the following story about Brahmananda's extraordinary power: "Compared to myself, Rakhali is only a young lad. I know that Sri Ramakrishna regarded him as his spiritual son, but that is not the only reason why I feel such a deep reverence for him. Once, while I was seriously ill, I found that I had lost my faith in Sri Ramakrishna. My heart felt dry. Many of the brother-disciples came to see me, and I told them about the unhappy state of my mind, but they only kept silent. Then, one day, Rakhali came. He asked me how I felt, and I described the dryness and lack of devotion from which I was suffering. Rakhali listened attentively, then he laughed aloud. 'Why worry about it?' he asked me. 'The waves of the ocean

rise high, then they go down again, and again they rise. The mind is like that. But please do not be troubled. Your present mood is due to the fact that you are about to rise to a much higher level of spirituality. The wave of the mind is gathering strength.' When he left me, all the dryness in my heart had gone. My faith had returned, and my mind rose to a higher level than ever before."

Maharaj initiated me while I was still a college student of eighteen. I wanted to join the monastery at that time but Maharaj instructed me to finish my education first. While at the university, I became involved with the revolutionary movement to overthrow the English government. However I did not lose my interest in spiritual life. In 1914, during Christmas vacation, I stayed a few days at the Belur Monastery in order to study Vedanta philosophy -- one of my courses at the university -- with Swami Shuddhananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda and a great and learned scholar of Hindu philosophy. He used to urge me to become a monk but I would argue with him: I thought the monastic life was lazy. I wanted to devote myself to political activities, believing that India must be freed from the domination of the British. An old man, who was also a guest at the monastery, used to be present during these arguments. Swami Shuddhananda could never convince me. One morning, as usual, I went to prostrate before Maharaj. This old man was also in the room. Suddenly he asked Maharaj: "When is this boy going to become a monk?" Maharaj looked me up and down, and his eyes had an unforgettable sweetness as he answered quietly: "When the Lord wills." That was the end of my political plans and ambitions. I remained at the monastery.

My own case was not exceptional. Many politically-minded young men who came into contact with Maharaj were inspired by the spiritual ideals of renunciation, service, and of realizing God. They began to realize that the awakening of India would never come through political action, but only through an intensification of the nation's spiritual life -- and that this awakening would benefit not merely India but all mankind.

Maharaj had wonderful insight into the character and spiritual growth of individuals. A friend of mine, whom he knew, renounced the world and went to Hrishikesh to practice austerity. He would not accept the guidance of any guru. After a few month's practice he wrote me, saying that he had attained samadhi. At that time I was with Maharaj at Kankhal, and I told him the substance of my friend's letter.

"Why!" exclaimed Maharaj: "I saw him about ten days ago. I looked into his eyes. He has not had samadhi. No doubt, he has had some kind of mystic vision -- the vision of light, perhaps -- and he mistakes that for samadhi. An aspirant is often led astray like that, when he has no guru to advise him.

"Samadhi! Is it an easy matter to attain samadhi? We saw Swamiji in samadhi only a few times. Sri Ramakrishna alone we saw in samadhi many times each day and night."

Then he quoted a verse from the Mundaka Upanishad: "The knot of the heart, which is ignorance, is loosed, all doubts are dissolved, all evil effects of deeds are

destroyed, when he who is both personal and impersonal is realized."

"Is it ever possible," I asked, "to attain samadhi after a short time?"

"Yes, if a man has lived an absolutely continent life."

Once I told Maharaj about a swami who had been stung by a scorpion and seemed to be miraculously cured by the power of a mantram. Maharaj laughed and said: "Come along!" He took me to the garden, pointed to a plant, and told me: "Look, the juice of this plant cures a scorpion sting!"

Maharaj did not want his disciples to be credulous or superstitious. By his attitude he taught me to rely upon natural explanations rather than look for super-natural phenomena.

Maharaj, with his deep insight, knew the strength and weakness of each of his disciples. He was always ready to help, but insisted that the disciples should also make some effort. Once, I asked him to free my mind from lust. "I could do that for you," he replied, "but then my child, you would lose all the joy of struggle. Life would seem insipid."

One morning Swami Gnaneshwarananda hurried out of his room, leaving behind an unmade bed and general confusion. He met Maharaj on the *maidan*, a large, open field near his room. After paying his respects, he was startled to hear Maharaj say: "Take me to your room; I wish you see the place where you sleep."

Swami Gnaneshwarananda, feeling ashamed, replied: "Maharaj, can you not come a little later? I was not expecting you and the room is not fit to receive you."

Maharaj said: "My boy, you must always be expecting me."

Swami Gnaneshwarananda understood the deep meaning of this incident and the words of Maharaj -- that one must always be prepared to receive the Lord, the most honored guest.

Sri Ramakrishna himself often rebuked his most intimate disciples, and Maharaj also used this method to train those who were near and dear to him. The chastening of a disciple never began, however, until after he had enjoyed several years of love and kind words. These experiences were painful at the time, but they were later treasured among the disciple's sweetest memories. It often happened that even while the disciple was being reproached by Maharaj, he would feel a strange undercurrent of joy. The indifference of Maharaj was the only thing we could not have borne; but Maharaj was never indifferent. The harsher his words, the more intensely we felt his interest in our welfare. The very fact that he could speak to us in this way proved that we were his children, his own. Sometimes, a disciple would be reproved for quite insignificant reasons, or on grounds that seemed to him utterly unjust. But, as time passed, he would realize that there had been certain tendencies and karmas stored in his subconscious mind and that Maharaj had seen them and was working to annihilate them before they could appear and become harmful. Thus, at the cost of a

little unpleasantness, the disciple would be spared years of painful struggle and self-discipline.

At one time Maharaj was disciplining me continually. All day long he would scold me. On one occasion I was supposed to have some stationery designed for him. I examined the proofs of the letter-heads carefully before I presented several ornamental fonts to him from which to choose. When the stationery was printed, one of my brother-disciples took it to Maharaj, and then came back trembling: "Maharaj says the 'S' is broken!" I went to Maharaj. He scolded me vehemently. Then I opened the style-book and showed him that the space in the letter "S" to which he was objecting was really a part of the design. Nevertheless, he continued to scold me.

Although he did not mention the real reason for his scolding, he somehow gave me to understand that it had nothing to do with the letterheads -- the apparent cause of his rebuke. He was wiping out karmas from my subconscious mind.

When Maharaj disciplined us, he gave us the power to bear it. We never reacted with resentment. We knew that whatever he did was for our own good.

There was only one occasion when I felt that I had perhaps lost my master's love, and because I could not endure the thought, that very night I decided to run away from the monastery and hide myself forever. Thus resolved, I went next morning to prostrate before Maharaj, and silently take my leave of him. I was about to go, when he told me to sit down. For a while he continued to scold me, reminding me of all my faults. Then with a sudden change of manner and great earnestness, he asked: "Do you think you can run away from me? The mother holds the child on her lap and spanks him; and the child cries: 'Mother, mother!' " Never before had I been so deeply aware of his love and protection. All thought of running away was forgotten. His words soothed my burning heart. Then he said: "Our love is so deep that we do not let you know how much we love you."

The truth of this statement was proved to me as I watched how Maharaj dealt with Hariharananda, another disciple who had been for many years his personal attendant. Hariharananda had begun to depend too much upon our master; he needed to learn to stand on his own feet. So, with a show of displeasure, Maharaj sent him away to practice austerities in the solitude of a temple in Southern India. Some years later, Maharaj was in Madras and arranged for Hariharananda to visit him. I was alone with Maharaj throughout the entire evening on which he was to arrive. Watching Maharaj, I saw that he was as restless as a loving mother who was expecting her son after a long absence. In due time, Hariharananda arrived, but fearing that Maharaj was still angry with him, he felt shy and wanted to postpone their meeting until the morning. Knowing the real state of affairs, I insisted that he should see Maharaj at once. However, when Hariharananda came into the room, Maharaj no longer showed any sign of his loving anxiety. He merely greeted his disciple quietly and asked if he had been keeping well.

On another occasion, while I was being reproved in the presence of Ramlal Dada, the nephew of Sri Ramakrishna, another young disciple entered the room. Maharaj turned to him and said jokingly: "With those glasses on, you look like Keshab Sen."

The disciple did not answer, for he saw that I was being scolded. Then Ramlal Dada turned to him and said: "Do you know why Maharaj is rebuking this boy in your presence? There is a saying that the mother scolds her daughter in order to teach the daughter-in-law."

I remember for the first time Maharaj ever reproved me. I had failed to do a certain errand for him, because I had not understood exactly what it was he wanted. For this neglect he scolded me throughout the afternoon. At supper time, Swami Turiyananda was seated with Maharaj and I was fanning them. The scolding continued. I remained silent. Swami Turiyananda turned to me and asked: "Do you know why Maharaj is so hard on you?"

"No," I replied, "frankly, I don't. I do not see how I am to blame."

Then Swami Turiyananda said: "There are three classes of disciples. The third-class disciple merely does the guru's bidding. The second-class disciple does not have to be told. He acts as soon as the thought arises in the guru's mind. But the first-class disciple acts even before the guru has had time to think. Maharaj wants you all to become first-class disciples."

To this Maharaj added simply: "You see, brother Hari, I am getting old; they do not obey me any more. Please knock a little sense into their heads."

There was another time when I did not write to Maharaj because my vanity had been wounded. When he came to Madras from Bangalore and asked me why I had not written, I answered carelessly: "Oh, you got all news of me from Swami Shivananda."

At a glance, he understood my mood, and asked sarcastically: "I suppose you have the key to the treasure house inside you, and don't need me any more?" My ill humor vanished immediately. "How can you say that?" I exclaimed: "You know that you hold the key!"

Maharaj continued to scold me for my negligence in not writing to him. Then he told me how Sri Ramakrishna, by his mere touch, removed the spiritual obstacles that stood in his disciple's path. To this I answered: "Yes -- Sri Ramakrishna did all that for you. But when our turn comes you can only scold us."

Maharaj shook his head, and said with great sweetness: "No, my boy. You have no need to worry." Then he repeated three times: "I see how Sri Ramakrishna is doing everything for you."

Even though Maharaj once said: "Our love is so deep that we do not let you know how much we love you," there is still the fact that you can get honey from a honeycomb if you poke it. He could not always hide his deep love and concern. This was made evident to me when at one time I asked permission to live in solitude and practice austerities.

At first he granted my request, but I did not realize then that he was not really

serious. He had said: "All right, go to the River Narmada and practice austerities, and let me see what you can do!"

Within a few weeks I had made the necessary arrangements -- and my blanket and clothing were packed and ready. When I came to bid Maharaj goodbye and receive his blessings, he asked with alarm: "Where are you going?" I replied: "You have given me permission to go to the Narmada and practice austerities. I am ready to go."

Like a father about to lose his only son, he anxiously requested that I call Swami Shivananda at once. The Swami came immediately. As if he himself could not convince me that I should stay, Maharaj explained the situation to Swami Shivananda. With some agitation, he said: "Look, brother, this boy wants to practice austerities! What do these boys know about such things? Why do they have to practice austerities? We have done all that for them."

After this Maharaj began to speak of high spiritual matters. Other monks of the Order gathered. He continued to talk in this way for three long hours, stopping only when he was told that a householder devotee wanted to see him. He remarked: "Now I can't continue. My mind has come down to a lower level." Later, Swami Shivananda said to me: "Today I learned many things I had not known before -- just because you poked the honeycomb of Maharaj."

Sometimes the harsh behavior of Maharaj toward a disciple amounted to apparent cruelty. Three of us were to be initiated into the monastic order at the same time. One was a boy who had been greatly praised because he had steadfastly practiced spiritual disciplines. We had all noticed his growth. Just as the formal rites were about to begin, Maharaj suddenly turned to this boy and said, "Why are you here? I shall not initiate you. Go away."

My brother-disciple and I were both shocked and felt that Maharaj had been cruel. But the boy himself later admitted that the praise he had received had made him vain. Maharaj, by his drastic action, had killed the seed which might have grown into deadly spiritual pride. For ten days he suffered bitterly. Then he also was initiated into sannyas.

Maharaj also taught by joking and making fun. Often his humorous remarks contained a deep inner meaning. To one disciple he used to write dogged verses, and the truths they expressed were sometimes far from pleasant. While in Madras, he used to dictate these poems to me. One of them had a line in it: "I have given that which is holy unto a dog." He told me to mail this poem to the disciple. Its harshness pained me and I spoke of it to Ramlal Dada, saying that I was afraid the feelings of the disciple would be deeply hurt. Ramlal Dada reported my remark to Maharaj. Meanwhile, I had gone to bed, but Maharaj sent for me. He told me to bring the poem and read it to him. I did so, and repeated my objection. Maharaj was silent for a moment. Then he said: "No, send it as it is. He is too thick-skinned to get my meaning any other way." And how right he was! These verses made a deep impression upon the disciple and awakened his spiritual understanding.

The reproaches of Maharaj were always followed by tenderness and sweetness. About a week before Maharaj left Madras I was arranging flowers in his room. I did not notice that he had come in. Suddenly he whispered into my ear: "Lovest thou me?" A thrill passed through my whole being, and for a moment I could neither speak nor move. When I was able to turn around, I saw that he was already leaving the room.

I still remember the last words Maharaj ever spoke to me. It was on the eve of his departure from Madras; I was cooking a sweet for him and he was walking up and down, close by. Suddenly, he came over and whispered into my ear: "It makes me feel so bad, having to leave you. I shall miss you very much." Later, at the end of a letter, he repeated those same loving words: "I miss you very much."

"M." once told Vishwananda, a disciple of Maharaj: "Observe how Maharaj acts and you will have some idea of what Sri Ramakrishna was like. When his mind came down to the finite plane, his sense of humor was very keen." This was also true of Maharaj. One of his favorite jokes was to have some fruits or sweets placed beside a disciple who was meditating. When the disciple had finished his meditation he would find his favorite dishes laid out before him. Later Maharaj would ask: "Well, did you get the fruits of your austerities?"

Often he would make us all roar with laughter. I remember once, while we were laughing, he nudged me and said, pointing to Vishwananda: "Look! How he giggles like a girl!" Maharaj would sometimes remark: "It is good to laugh every day. It relaxes the body and the mind."

The following stories will give a glimpse of Maharaj's sense of fun, and also of the deep love he had toward his brother-disciples. One story is told by Swami Satprakashananda:

One afternoon Maharaj was seated on the large bench on the ground-floor veranda of the Math building facing the Ganges. The old Math building provided the only residential quarters of the Belur Monastery at that time.

I was standing very close to Maharaj. Presently, a young man, who had come to the monastery to spend a vacation in the company of holy men approached Maharaj to take leave of him. His holiday was over, and he was about to return to his own home.

Maharaj had noticed that, during his stay, the young man had been particularly devoted to Swami Premananda, who was the center of attraction to many ardent visitors in those days.

With his characteristic sense of humor, Maharaj took the opportunity to have a little fun at the expense of his brother-disciple, Swami Premananda.

"Have you taken leave of Swami Premananda?" he asked as the young man bowed down before him. "No, Maharaj, not yet," he replied. "I am going to take leave of him now."

"Well, when you bow down to him you should say the *pranama-mantra* (salutation mantra). Perhaps you do not know this mantram, but I shall teach you!"

So saying, Maharaj began to recite a Bengali couplet which he improvised as he went along. Freely translated, it ran something like this: "My mind is reluctant to go back home; it is my heart's keen

desire to lie down forever at those blessed feet."

Then Maharaj instructed him how to act while saying the mantram. He told him to first stand before Swami Premananda with hands folded in great veneration, and repeat the couplet until he came to the line "to lie down forever at those blessed feet," when he was to direct his still folded hands toward the Swami's feet, and then dive down.

The young man turned to go, and as he left, Maharaj told me to go and watch. I followed the youth and saw him standing before Swami Premananda with folded hands as Maharaj had instructed him. But he was silent. However, as he bowed down, the Swami noticed that he was mumbling something, and asked: "What is this? What are you saying? Speak out, my boy!" But the boy remained silent. And then I laughed. Hearing me laugh, Swami Premananda turned to me and said: "Ah! You know what he is saying, surely! Please tell me!" And then I told him the whole story of the pranama-mantra and when I had finished there was a roar of laughter.

The other story tells of an affectionate trick Maharaj played on his brother-disciple, Swami Akhandananda.

The Swami had been staying with Maharaj for some considerable time, when he decided he would like to return to his own *ashrama*. Maharaj begged him to stay a little while longer, but the Swami persisted.

Seeing his evident determination to go, Maharaj engaged a palanquin to take the Swami to the railway station, which was several miles away. The train was due in the early morning, which meant that the Swami had to leave late at night.

Before the bearers set out with Swami Akhandananda, Maharaj whispered something to them. It was dark when they left, so the Swami settled down behind the curtains of the palanquin. Every once in a while the bearers would stop, and the Swami would anxiously inquire what they were stopping for. Each time, they assured him that they were stopping merely to rest and to have a smoke, but that there was no need for anxiety; he would arrive at his destination in plenty of time.

After several hours of arduous travel the bearers finally stopped for the last time, and asked Swami Akhandananda to alight. Just as he was about to get out of the palanquin he saw Maharaj standing before him, greeting him as though he had just arrived after a long absence. When the Swami realized that he had been carried around the compound all night he roared with laughter. Maharaj embraced him and they both laughed like two children.

The relationship between guru and disciple, according to the Hindu scriptures, is a very sacred one. Maharaj used to say that an enlightened soul must help his disciple until he also becomes enlightened. This tie cannot be broken by the death of the body. After the teacher has passed away, he still continues to watch over his disciples in spirit. He will not accept his own final liberation until all are liberated.

Maharaj was the embodiment of the protective power of the guru.

At one time, he was walking with another disciple and myself. He was slightly ahead of us. Suddenly we heard a shout: "Out of the way! There's a mad bull!" An instant later, we saw the bull itself rushing towards us. There was no time to run. My brother-disciple and I tried to get in front of Maharaj to protect him, but he raised his arm and pushed us back. Although he was now an elderly man, he was still extraordinarily strong. As the bull approached with lowered head, there was a moment's pause; Maharaj stood still, confronting it. Then the bull stopped, shook its head from side to side, lifted it, and walked quietly away.

Swami Akhilananda related a similar incident which took place at Bhubaneswar.

Maharaj had gone for an evening walk in the woods with Akhilananda and another devotee. By the time they turned homeward, it was dark. All at once they saw a leopard coming toward them. Maharaj stood still. The leopard also stopped, about a hundred feet away, and looking at them for some moments. Then it turned away and ran off. Neither of the devotees felt frightened. There could never be any fear in the presence of Maharaj.

Maharaj prescribed various disciplines and diverse forms of worship to suit the different temperaments of his disciples. He knew our needs far better than we did. When I first joined the Order I was inclined toward the path of devotion, but Maharaj decided to send me to a monastery in the Himalayas where the ideal of nondualism is practiced and no ritual is allowed. Before I left, he made me read aloud to him a book on extreme nondualism. Two years later, he sent me to the monastery in Madras where ritual is regarded as very important. By this time I had lost all my devotional inclination and no longer believed in ritualistic worship. Some time later, Maharaj came to visit this monastery. One day, a devotee brought a large basket of *naga lingam* flowers to be offered in the worship. Knowing that they were the favorite flowers of Maharaj, I arranged them in his room. Maharaj came in, saw what I was doing, and asked: "Have you saved some of those flowers for the worship of the Lord?"

"No, Maharaj," I replied. For I had thought to myself: "After all, the Lord in the shrine room is only a picture, but the guru is the living God." Maharaj, as usual, read my thoughts, and asked: "Do you think it is merely a picture that is worshipped in the shrine?"

"Yes," I replied, somewhat nervously.

"Have you ever performed the ritualistic worship?"

"No, Maharaj."

"Why not?"

"I am not yet a swami, and I am not a *brahmin* by caste. So I am not allowed to do the external worship in the shrine."

Maharaj became quite excited. "What is all this?" he exclaimed. "Call Sharvananda."

Swami Sharvananda was a disciple of Maharaj and the head of the Madras monastery. When he appeared, Maharaj asked him: "How is it that a brahmachari of this Order is not allowed to do the worship, just because he is not a brahmin?"

Sharvananda answered: "Swami Ramakrishnananda was the first head of this monastery. He was very particular that the worship should be performed only by a swami or a brahmin."

"It should not be that way," Maharaj replied. "Anyone who has been initiated and

who has entered the Order is purified in his body and birth; therefore, he should be allowed to do the worship." Then, turning to me, he said: "You will do the worship."

"But Maharaj," I replied, "I do not believe in ritualistic worship. I do not see the living Presence in the picture."

"I am asking you to do the worship now," Maharaj said quietly. "Will you?"

I obediently followed his instructions and, within a few days, became convinced of the great efficacy of external worship.

Almost his last advice to me was: "Be ritualistic." And he added: "Look at Ambikananda (one of his senior disciples); see how wonderfully he is progressing through the practice of ritualism."

This does not mean, however, that Maharaj asked everybody to practice ritualism. In fact, there are many of his disciples who have never learned the rites of formal worship. Hinduism teaches the value of ritual, but does not say that it is essential to every one's spiritual progress.

I must mention two quotations which Maharaj never tired of repeating to his disciples. The first was: "Tell the truth, but never a harsh truth." The second was from the teachings of Sri Chaitanya:

Be humbler than a blade of grass,

Be patient and forbearing like the tree,

Take no honor to thyself,

Give honor to all,

Chant unceasingly the Name of the Lord.

I will conclude this chapter by giving an example of the way in which the guru power of Maharaj was manifested. Swami Vivekananda once remarked: "A real guru knows the past, present, and the future of all his disciples." Maharaj knew this about each one of us, as is shown by the following incident which a monastic disciple describes:

"I was sitting cross-legged in front of Maharaj with his feet resting on my knees. This was the position in which I often used to massage his feet. Then something happened to me which I cannot explain, though I feel certain that it was Maharaj's doing. I found myself in a condition in which I was talking and talking, forgetting my usual restraint; it seemed to me that I spoke freely and even eloquently for a long time, but I do not remember what I said. Maharaj listened and said nothing.

"Suddenly I returned to normal consciousness and became aware of Maharaj leaning toward me and asking with an amused smile: "What did you say?" I then realized that I had addressed him as 'tumi' (the familiar form of 'you' which is used in speaking to equals and friends). I hastened to correct myself, repeating the sentence -- I have forgotten what it was -- but using 'apani' (the respectful form of 'you' by which we addressed him). At this he seemed to lose all interest in the conversation and sat

upright again.

"I can only assume that Maharaj wanted to corroborate his own intuitive knowledge of my past lives, and that he therefore put me into this unusual state of consciousness in which I was able to tell him what he wanted to know."

VI

MYSTIC VISIONS

MAHARAJ once told me: "There are times when it becomes impossible for me to teach anyone. No matter where I look, I see only God, wearing many masks. Who am I, the teacher? Who is to be taught? How can God teach God? But when my mind comes down again, to a lower level, I see the ignorance in man and I try to remove it."

Maharaj spent most of his later life in a state of high spiritual consciousness, coming down only in order to teach and help us. His awareness of God had become so habitual that he would experience mystical visions even while conscious of the external world around him. He rarely spoke of these visions, and when he did so it was only to his brother-swamis or disciples.

Vijnanananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, said of Maharaj and his visions: "The gods and goddesses are not myths, they are real. They are the many aspects of the one Godhead. I know this because Maharaj used to see and talk to them." I shall record a few of Maharaj's visions in this chapter.

It was the year 1901, a few days before the annual worship of Durga -- God the Mother in her aspect as protectress of the universe. Maharaj was sitting on the bank of the Ganges at the Belur Math. Suddenly he saw Mother Durga walking on the surface of the Ganges towards the monastery grounds. She passed under the sacred vilwa tree in the monastery garden and then disappeared. A moment later Swamiji arrived by boat, came to Maharaj, and said: "Raja, make arrangements at once for the worship of Mother Durga." Then he told Maharaj that he had had a vision, and had seen Mother Durga being worshipped at the monastery. Maharaj, in turn, described his own vision to Swamiji, and they began at once to prepare for the worship. Since that date the special worship of Mother Durga has been held every year at the Belur Monastery. Maharaj also performed this worship at the monasteries in Kankhal, Benares, and Madras. He once told Akhilananda that he performed this worship in obedience to the Mother's direct command. Akhilananda records that, during the Durga festival in Madras, the power of Maharaj was specially felt by his disciples, and their minds were raised to higher levels of spirituality.

Maharaj used to observe Christmas every year by offering special worship to Jesus. The story of the Nativity was read aloud from the Bible and followed by meditation. Fruit, bread, cake and wine were offered in the worship.

Sister Devamata, an American devotee who happened to be present on one such occasion records the scene as follows:

"When I had finished reading, the intense stillness in the air led me to look towards Swami Brahmananda. His eyes were open and fixed on the altar, there was a smile on his lips, but it was evident that his consciousness had gone to a higher plane. No one moved or spoke. At the end of twenty minutes or more, the look of immediate seeing returned to his eyes and he motioned to us to continue the service."

After the service, as Maharaj was partaking of the sacramental food, he remarked to Sister Devamata: "While you were reading, Christ suddenly stood before the altar, dressed in a long blue cloak. He talked to me for some time. It was a very blessed moment."

Swami Vishwananda relates the following incident:

"One day Ram Nam was sung in Maharaj's small room at the Udbodhan office, where he was staying while Holy Mother was visiting her native village. There were only half a dozen people present. Maharaj was repeatedly in ecstasy. Sometimes his body shook, sometimes it was stiff. He uttered a few syllables expressing great joy. The place became surcharged with spiritual vibrations. I felt I was transported to another realm. When the singing was over, an attendant of Swami Premananda saluted Maharaj before taking his leave. As he bowed down to him, Maharaj exclaimed: 'Foolish boy, where will you go now?: What happened here was more than meditation!' The implication was clear. Why should the brahmachari leave this spot where God-consciousness was to tangible?"

"In Maharaj's presence we understood the meaning of these words: 'The guru expounds the texts of the scriptures in silence. The doubts of the disciples are dispelled.' "

The guru sees directly into the inner nature of the spiritual seeker and addresses himself to the aspirant's highest yearnings.

On an afternoon of a beautiful spring day in March 1916, a young Indian girl came to the monastery to see Maharaj. Forced into marriage by her parents, she had run away from her husband to the monastery, and as soon as she was brought into the presence of Maharaj, she fell at his feet saying: "O father, I have no desire to live a worldly life. I wish only to spend my days here at the monastery under your guidance. My one desire is to worship God and realize him. To him alone I would surrender myself, body, mind and soul." Deeply touched by her evident earnestness and guilelessness of character, Maharaj replied: "My child, this is a monastery! How can you stay here? Go back to your parents; they are worried about you. Stay with them; study the scriptures and read the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Pray to Sri Ramakrishna. He knows the yearnings of your heart and will answer your prayers. Later on you may go to the Nivedita school for girls, or to the ashrama of Gouri-Ma. You have the true understanding. Vain indeed is this human birth unless one has love for God!" But the young girl refused to return to her parents' home, so Maharaj blessed her and sent her to the ashrama.

After she had left, Maharaj walked slowly into the library where he found Swami Premananda writing a letter. He sat down beside him, and almost immediately went into a mood of ecstasy. Those who watched him could catch only a glimpse of the ecstatic joy which shone through his radiant face. His expression and behavior were indescribable. Swami Premananda watched him for a while, then, turning to the young monk who was also present, said: "Watch Maharaj! That mood in which you see him is known as the *paramahansa* state!"

In a little while, Maharaj returned to normal consciousness, and said to Swami Premananda: "Who can understand the divine play of Sri Ramakrishna? Swami Vivekananda wanted to see a convent established for young women, and now I see that some day soon his desire will be fulfilled. Young women are becoming imbued with the ideal of renunciation as taught by our master. That girl who came today was like a goddess in her beauty, her purity, her earnestness, and her guilelessness!"

There is a saying in Sanskrit: "Places of pilgrimage are made holy by the visits of the seers of God." The enlightened soul does not need to visit holy places or temples, for he has realized the living God everywhere. Wherever he lives, that place becomes holy. Nevertheless, we know that enlightened men often journey to shrines and temples. They do so because they find there a great manifestation of God -- a more concentrated revelation, as it were.

This spiritual concentration has been caused by the visits of many holy men and women and by the devotion of pilgrims throughout the ages. When a saint goes to a holy place, he contributes his own revelation to the spiritual treasure house for the benefit of the generations that will follow.

The temples of India are dedicated to deities of many forms and aspects as well as to the impersonal formless Godhead. This one Godhead, whose name is Silence, comprises all divine forms and aspects, yet is beyond form and definition. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "Never set a limit to the Infinite by trying to define it." And indeed, it is evident that the infinite God must have infinite forms of expression. "Truth is one, sages call it by various names," says the Rig Veda, the ancient scripture of the Hindus.

In an orchestra, different instruments play different notes, but when these notes are harmonized, the combined effect is of one beautiful unity. Maharaj reached this unity through his realization of Brahman. An ordinary mystic may be aware of only one instrument and hear only one note -- one part or aspect of the divine whole. The illumined soul, however, hears all the instruments, the entire orchestra. Thus it was that Maharaj, while ever conscious of the one Brahman, was able to see the many divine aspects when he visited the temples dedicated to them.

At Madura, in Southern India, there is a famous temple of Divine Mother. When Maharaj entered it and stood before the deity, he exclaimed: "Mother, Mother!" and lost his external consciousness. Swami Ramakrishnananda, who was with him, saw his condition and held him by the arms to prevent him from falling. Seeing Maharaj standing unconscious in ecstasy, the priests and devotees who were present gazed at him in silence. An intense stillness pervaded the temple and lasted for more than an hour. When Maharaj regained his normal consciousness he went silently away. Later he described his vision of the luminous form of Divine Mother. At the temple of Rameswar, which is dedicated to Siva, the formless aspect of God, Maharaj was again absorbed in samadhi. Even after he returned to normal consciousness, he remained for some time in a state of ecstatic joy.

The temple at Cape Comorin is dedicated to Divine Mother in the form of a little girl. Maharaj lived there for several days. For a while he would stand silent and motionless before the deity; then he would become ecstatic and begin to talk to her. Whenever he entered the temple, he lost all external consciousness. In the temple of Vishnu at Tirupati in Southern India, Maharaj had a strange experience. The vision he beheld there, was not of Vishnu, but of Divine Mother. On inquiry it was found that the temple had once been dedicated to Mother, and later had changed into a Vishnu temple through the influence of Ramanuja.

In the temple of Jagannath at Puri, there are three images. Sri Krishna stands on one side, his brother, Balaram, on the other, and Subhadra, his sister, stands in the center. Here Maharaj once saw the living Krishna on the altar; the three images had disappeared. Maharaj visited this temple many times and each time he went there he seemed to dwell in another realm, and his face shone with a radiant smile.

Of the many places of pilgrimage that Maharaj visited, he loved Brindavan and Benares most of all. He used to tell us that in these two cities a spiritual current is always flowing, and that this current grows particularly strong at certain times of the day and night. He said that if a man meditates and practices japam in Brindaban at midnight he is greatly helped by the spiritual current, and if he meditates in Benares at four o'clock in the morning he easily becomes absorbed into the higher consciousness. In later years when Maharaj visited the temples at Brindavan and Benares, he would ask his disciples to sing and chant and he himself would go into samadhi.

Speaking of Benares, he said: "Many have found enlightenment there. If the aspirant struggles a little to reach union with God, he may get it very easily." Only once did Maharaj initiate a disciple in Benares. After that he refused to do so, because, as he said: "Lord Siva gives liberation to all those who live and die there." A disciple, who later became Swami Akhilananda, was once in Benares with Maharaj and wanted initiation. "Holy Mother does not initiate any disciple in Benares," Maharaj told him. "I have made the same rule." Then in a sweet affectionate voice he added: "I will initiate you when I go back to the monastery at Belur. Don't be impatient. In my mind I have already accepted you as my disciple and have made myself responsible for you."

Once, during the celebration of Sri Ramakrishna's birthday at Belur, while the disciples were singing and chanting, Maharaj went into samadhi. He was carried to his room, completely unconscious of the outer world, his face shining with a heavily radiance. He remained in this condition so long that his brother disciples became anxious. They told Holy Mother who was present at the time, but she showed no anxiety; indeed she seemed well pleased, and said: "Do not worry about him." Then she went to Maharaj, touched his arm lightly and said in an affectionate voice: "Rakhal, I have brought sacramental food for you. Eat, my child." Maharaj immediately returned to normal consciousness, and, seeing Holy Mother, prostrated at her feet.

He used to say: "It is very hard to understand Mother's greatness, unless she herself reveals it. Through the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, one may recognize the Divine Mother in her."

Once, while Maharaj was visiting Holy Mother, a female disciple of Sri Ramakrishna said to him, "Rakhal, Mother wanted to know from you why a spiritual aspirant must worship the Divine Mother first." Maharaj answered: "Mother has the key to the knowledge of Brahman. Unless she shows her grace and opens the door, no one can enter into the realm of Brahman."

As he left the house where Holy Mother was staying, Maharaj began to sing and

dance, clapping his hands like a little boy. Whenever he was with Holy Mother, he always acted in this childlike manner which expressed the relationship between them.

Once Akhilananda, who was then a very young boy, was told by Swami Vijnanananda to say to Maharaj when he met him: "There is something within me that needs awakening -- please give me your help." Akhilananda repeated these words to Maharaj, who replied: "Why didn't you ask Vijnanananda to do this awakening for you?" Akhilananda answered that he had, but that Swami Vijnanananda had said: "I have very little spiritual power within me, but Maharaj lives in the powerhouse. He can easily do what you ask." Maharaj looked very serious and said: "Yes, the awakening will come. Don't be impatient. For this awakening one needs initiation."

"Then please initiate me."

"That will be done," Maharaj promised.

To quote Akhilananda's own words: "Maharaj made us feel that spiritual awakening and God realization are not difficult to achieve. He made us understand that if only we will struggle a little, tremendous help will be given us, and that we shall easily reach the goal."

In his later years Maharaj had the vision of Sri Ramakrishna every day. He used to tell me: "I see Sri Ramakrishna every day and talk to him." To another disciple he said: "I see Sri Ramakrishna wherever he chooses to reveal himself to me. By his grace, you also will see him and talk to him."

Although Maharaj lived almost continuously in a high state of consciousness, he was very natural and human in his behavior. Even when he was quite a young man, Sri Ramakrishna said of him: "Rakhal is like the kind of mango which still looks green outside when it is ripe and sweet within." And this was true throughout his life. Whenever he could, he would hide his ecstatic mood and act in the most normal way. I have already mentioned his sense of humor. Balaram's wife once dreamt that she was feeding Maharaj. Taking this for an omen, she invited him to a sumptuous feast which she herself cooked. When Maharaj had enjoyed the dinner, he turned to her grandson and said: "Tell your grandmother to dream more often."

His love of gardening has been referred to in an earlier chapter. At every monastery he visited, he gave valuable advice as to the laying out of gardens. Often he would gaze at the blossoming flowers and remark: "Look! There you see the worship of God in his universal form going on unceasingly."

Maharaj also loved music. He always had a band of musicians or a singer with him. Maharaj himself did not sing much -- just occasionally a line or so. But every morning he would chant the various names of the Lord in his sweet voice. One day a fine musician was playing musical scales. A devotee complained that no devotional songs were being played. This jarred Maharaj. He turned to the devotee and said:

"Don't you realize that sound is Brahman?"

One day at the Ramakrishna Math in Madras I was in the monastery's library, whose door opens to a large hallway. The shrine is directly above. As I opened the library door, I suddenly saw Maharaj in the distance, with arms outstretched, moving about the hall as though he were dancing. He was alone and completely absorbed in God. Speechless with amazement, I watched him, thrilled by the sight. Suddenly his eyes fell upon me and with arms still outstretched he advanced in my direction. However, I at once began to feel nervous and started to back away. I did not consider myself pure enough to touch Maharaj while he was in such a lofty mood, and I was afraid that my presence might disturb his ecstasy. So I silently shut the library door and went away.

Many of his householder disciples came to Maharaj with their worldly troubles and problems. Not only did he listen to them sympathetically, but he also gave them constructive advice. Many successful professional men, such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, found it very easy to discuss the problems of their work with Maharaj. He would listen with intelligent interest and understanding, and was often able to offer a new suggestion or another angle of approach to the problem.

Even though he was interested in everything and in all the events of his time, his intimate disciples could see that beneath this apparent interest Maharaj always remained completely detached. The things of this world rolled off him like drops of water off a lotus leaf.

VII

HIS PASSING

I HAVE already described how Sri Ramakrishna saw Rakhai dancing with Sri Krishna on a mystic lotus shortly before the boy's first visit to Dakshineswar. Only a few intimate disciples knew of this vision, and Sri Ramakrishna had warned them never to reveal it to Maharaj, explaining that if he realized his true nature as the Eternal Companion of Krishna, he would leave his mortal body. The secret had therefore been very carefully guarded.

In March 1922, Maharaj went to Calcutta to stay for a while at the home of Balaram. Balaram himself had already passed away, but his whole family were sincere devotees of Ramakrishna, and his beautiful guesthouse was always at the disposal of all the swamis and disciples of the Order.

It is now regarded as a place of pilgrimage, sanctified by the presence of so many holy men.

While Maharaj was staying at the guesthouse, Ramlal Dada came to visit him. Ramlal Dada was a pure soul and a devotee of a very high order. During Ramakrishna's lifetime, he had been one of the Master's personal attendants and had served him with great devotion. Whenever he and Maharaj were together, their talk naturally turned to the early days. They would laugh and joke together, for they

stimulated each other's sense of fun. One day Maharaj asked Ramlal Dada to sing for him the songs he used to sing to Ramakrishna. It was arranged that many disciples and devotees should be present to hear the singing.

Ramlal Dada began to sing songs about Krishna and the shepherds and shepherdesses of Brindavan. At first, everyone was very gay as Ramlal mimicked the gestures of the shepherdesses, making his audience laugh. Suddenly, Maharaj, who had also been enjoying the fun, became serious. Ramlal Dada was singing: "Come back, O Krishna, come back to Brindavan. Come and reign in the hearts of your beloved shepherds and shepherdesses. Do not forget that you are a shepherd yourself." At that moment Maharaj seemed transported to a realm beyond this earth. The joking and laughter stopped. The atmosphere became calm and serene. It may be that at this moment Maharaj got a partial glimpse of his true nature and knew himself to be God's Eternal Companion. The events that followed seem to point to some such revelation.

A few days later, at midnight, Nirvanananda, a disciple and personal attendant of Maharaj, saw his master sitting on his bed in a very earnest mood. The disciple stood silently before him, waiting for him to speak. Maharaj looked at him, and said: "I woke suddenly and saw Sri Ramakrishna standing just there." He pointed to a spot in front of a couch, adding: "He didn't speak to me. He stood there silently for a while and then disappeared. I don't understand it."

After a few moments Maharaj continued in a low earnest voice: "I can't give my mind to the things of this world any longer. It wants to take complete refuge in Him and Him alone."

Shortly after this, the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna was celebrated. Maharaj stayed at the Belur Math for the occasion; then he returned to Balaram's home in Calcutta. Two days later he had a slight attack of cholera, but recovered within a week. This illness which left him feeble was followed by diabetes, which took a serious turn. Many doctors came to treat him one of whom wore the religious mark on his forehead.

"Doctor," said Maharaj, "the Lord Siva, whose symbol you wear on your forehead, is the only Reality. Everything else is unreal."

A devotee asked: "Maharaj, are you suffering very greatly?"

"Please try to realize," Maharaj answered, "that in my condition I have to bear physical suffering patiently and without complaint."

But as he said this, his face lighted up with a divine radiance. The pain seemed to have melted away. He lost external consciousness and became absorbed in meditation.

About nine o'clock that same evening, he placed his hand on Nirvanananda, and said: "Do not grieve. You have served me well. You shall be merged in God and

reach knowledge of Brahman. I give you my blessing that you may attain this."

Then he called call the disciples and devotees who were present to his side. For each he had a blessing and an affectionate word.

"Ah, my children," he said tenderly, "never forget God and you will realize the highest good. Do not sorrow. I shall be with you always."

Once more he became absorbed in his transcendental vision. After some time had passed, he continued in a sweet, tender voice: "I am floating, I am floating on the leaf of faith and knowledge on the ocean of Brahman." Then suddenly he exclaimed: "Ah! The feet of Sri Ramakrishna -- I know them! Viveka, my brother Vivekananda! Premananda ... Yogananda ..."

Thus, with his divine sight, he recognized the brother-disciples who had already passed away. He was living in that transcendental realm where he had lived throughout his life; but now he no longer concealed the fact. He began to describe his visions.

"Ah," he murmured softly, "the blissful ocean of Brahman! Om! Salutations to the Supreme Brahman! Om! Salutations to the Supreme Atman!"

While speaking of his divine experiences, his throat became dry. A disciple offered him a drink, saying: "Maharaj, please drink this water. It has lemon in it."

"The mind doesn't want to come down from Brahman," said Maharaj slowly. "Pour Brahman into Brahman," and like a child he opened his mouth for the water to be poured into it.

Then he turned to Swami Saradananda and said: "Brother, Sri Ramakrishna is real. His divine incarnation is real."

After this Maharaj was silent for a while. He was deeply absorbed in meditation, and his face wore an expression of great sweetness. The minds of those who were present were so uplifted that they felt no grief -- only joy and silent calm. All sense of the world and of death was lost.

Suddenly, out of the silence, the voice of Maharaj was heard: "Ah, that inexpressible light! Ramakrishna, the Krishna of my Ramakrishna ... I am the shepherd boy. Put anklets on my feet, I want to dance with my Krishna. I want to hold his hand -- the little boy Krishna ... Ah, Krishna, my Krishna, you have come! Krishna... Krishna... Can't you see him? Haven't you eyes to see? Oh, how beautiful! My Krishna... on the lotus ... eternal ... the Sweet One!

"My play is over now. Look! The child Krishna is caressing me. He is calling me to come away with him! I am coming ..."

The tenderness and heavenly compassion that filled his heart were expressed in

every word he uttered.

The whole atmosphere of the large hall where he was lying seemed to vibrate with this emotion. No one can describe the extraordinary sense of holiness which was created by his presence. Everyone knew that the fateful hour was approaching, and that Maharaj was taking his final leave.

During the early hours of the morning, he remained silent for some time and fell into a slumber. At seven o'clock he awoke, and was again possessed by this high spiritual mood. He called a few disciples who had just arrived but who had not been present the previous night. To each he gave his blessing, bestowing comfort and fearlessness.

Two more days passed, and another night came on. By this time his life was despaired of, and gloom fell upon all. His physical condition grew worse and worse, and the doctors were amazed that he had not passed into a coma days before, as is usual with this kind of illness. But so great was the power and spirituality of his mind, so completely was it freed from the meshes of physical matter, that it remained completely unaffected by the condition of his suffering body. He maintained perfect consciousness right up to the last moment of his life.

As that last evening faded into night, his chest suddenly heaved. It was as if a great wave of breath passed up the body to the throat. His half-closed eyes opened, and he gazed into the distance, his eyes shining with the brilliance and unspeakable beauty.

Thus it was that, on April 10, 1922, the life left his body.

"Do not grieve. I shall be with you always." Those were his last words to his disciples. After his passing away, we all had the feeling that Maharaj was intensely present within us. He was closer to us than ever before. As long as Maharaj was in the physical body there was a barrier. Afterward, the barrier was gone.

More than forty years have passed since that day and every disciple can bear witness to the fact that Maharaj still lives, protects, and guides him onward toward the goal.

When I was about to leave India and take up my duties in the United States, Swami Shivananda said to me: "Never forget that you have seen the Son of God. You have seen God."

(The Eternal Companion - Life and Spiritual Teachings of Swami Brahmananda - by Swami Yatiswarananda, Swami Prabhavananda and others, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras 600 004.)