

The Five Commandments of Sri Ramakrishna

By Swami Dayatmananda

(Reproduced from Vedanta Magazine – Vedanta Centre –London-UK – Jan to Oct 2002)

M. (humbly): "Yes, sir. How, sir, may we fix our minds on God?"

Master:

(1) "Repeat God's name and sing His glories, and

(2) keep holy company; and now and then visit God's devotees and holy men. The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities;

(3) it is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God. To fix the mind on God is very difficult, in the beginning, unless one practises meditation in solitude. When a tree is young it should be fenced all around; otherwise it may be destroyed by cattle.

"To meditate, you should withdraw within yourself or retire to a secluded corner or to the forest.

(4) And you should always discriminate between the Real and the unreal. God alone is real, the Eternal Substance; all else is unreal, that is, impermanent. By discriminating thus, one should shake off impermanent objects from the mind."

M. (humbly): "How ought we to live in the world?"

Master: (5) "Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all with wife and children, father and mother and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you."

On his second visit M. received the above five commandments from Sri Ramakrishna. M. practised them to perfection all his life and taught them to devotees who used to visit him.

These five commandments are of supreme importance for those who wish to progress in spiritual life. All aspirants, especially the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, must remember and assess their spiritual progress in the light of these commandments. If followed faithfully they are sure to lead to the highest realisation. To the extent the devotees are able to practise them, to that extent they are progressing in the realm of God.

The first of these commandments is to repeat God's name and sing His glories.

Religious lore is replete with the praises of the power and glory of God's name. Of all the spiritual practices, taking the name of God is the easiest. Sri Chaitanya was a prophet who preached the glory of God's name. Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna all have unequivocally emphasized the need for repetition of the name of God. A host of saints all over the world have advocated repeating the name of God. Many became saints solely through the repetition of God's name.

The name and the named are one; God and His name are one. The Master said: "God and His name are identical; that is the reason Radha said that. There is no difference between Rama and His holy name."

The name of God purifies and uplifts one who takes it; it washes away all sins and impurities. Indeed there are devotees who maintain that the name of God is even greater than God Himself. Through the power of God's name one can reach the highest realisation. Throughout his life Sri Ramakrishna himself repeated the name of his sweet Divine Mother even after attaining Nirvikalpa samadhi.

Sri Jagadananda Pandita, a Vaishnava saint, wrote in verse a book called *Prema-vivarta* (On the Glory of Divine Love), where he distinguishes different methods of taking God's name uttering, repeating, chanting and singing. But the best practice, he says, is singing the Divine Name, for that requires the services of many sense-organs. *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* of Rupa Goswami recognises sixty-four forms of devotion. Of these there are five main forms. They are: keeping the company of devotees, singing the Divine Name, hearing the scriptures, staying in a holy place, and serving the Deity with devotion. According to Vaishnava tradition the important sadhanas are three: kindness to all beings, taste for God's Name, and service to fellow devotees. *Caitanya-caritamrta* considers the chanting of the Divine Name as the best way of promoting devotion.

God's name is within the reach of all. Even illiterate people can attain God by the power of His name. Amongst the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, there was a lonely widow known as Gopala's Mother, who lived in a room beside the Ganges and spent her time in repeating the name of Gopala. Her life-long remembrance of God was rewarded in old age by the constant vision of Gopala, the Divine Child, who lived with her night and day for two months. She is to this day loved and honoured by the disciples and devotees of the Ramakrishna Order.

The glory of the Divine Name bears no comparison. As the *Adi purana* puts it: "There is no knowledge like Name, no vow like Name, no meditation like Name, no fruit like Name."

Chanting of the Lord's name does not go in vain. It must bear its benign result. It is like the philosopher's stone converting all baser metal into gold. It is like the magic wand of the magician performing unbelievable and unthought of miracles; it transforms man's life for ever.

Name is both the means and the end. To take God's name lovingly and to see Him are the same. To the votary of the Divine Name, it manifests itself as the Form, Quality and Sport of the Lord. The Form of the Lord is identical with His Name. Devotees say the Name is even greater than Form. Evidences of this can be seen in

the lives of Rama and Krishna. While Sri Rama had to construct a bridge to cross the ocean, Hanuman crossed it with the strength of Rama's Name. When Sri Krishna was put on the balance against His Name written on a Tulasi leaf, he was found to be lighter.

The essence of all scriptures is God's name. Once a sadhu who had remarkable faith in the name of God came to Dakshineswar. He carried with him a book in which the solitary word "Om Rama" was written in big letters in red ink. He worshipped this book daily with flowers and sometimes opened and read it. Sri Ramakrishna became curious to know what was written in the book. The monk showed him the book and said to him: "What is the use of reading a large number of books? For it is from the one divine Lord that the Vedas and Puranas have come; He and His name are not separate. . . That is why His name is my only companion"

Sri Ramakrishna himself was a great advocate of using the name of God. He said: "Chant His name and purify your body and mind. Purify your tongue by singing God's holy name."

Holy Mother said:

"The Mantra purifies the body. Man becomes pure by repeating the Mantra of God. ... It is said, 'The human teacher utters the Mantra into the ear; but God breathes the spirit into the soul.'

"As wind removes the cloud, so the Name of God destroys the cloud of worldliness."

Once a devotee showed to Holy Mother a tiny banyan seed and said to her, "Look, Mother, it is tinier even than the tiniest seed we know. From this will spring a giant tree! How strange!" "Indeed, it will," Mother replied. "See what a tiny seed is the Name of God. From it in time come divine moods, devotion, love, and spiritual consummation.

"Very powerful indeed is the Lord's name. It may not bring about an immediate result, but it must one day bear fruit, just as we find that a seed left long ago on the cornice of a building at last reaches the ground, germinates, grows into a tree, and bears fruit, perhaps when the building cracks and is demolished. Knowingly or unknowingly, consciously or unconsciously, in whatever state of mind a man utters God's name, he acquires the merit of such utterance. A man who voluntarily goes to a river and bathes therein gets the benefit of the bath: so does he also who has been pushed into the water by another, or who, when sleeping soundly, has water thrown upon him.

"There is a great power in the seed of God's name. It destroys ignorance. A seed is tender, and the sprout soft; still it pierces the hard ground. The ground breaks and makes way for the sprout."

The best thing for people whose minds are attracted by sense-objects is to cultivate the dualistic attitude and chant loudly the name of the Lord as mentioned in Narada-Pancharatra (a work on devotion).

"Through the path of devotion the subtle senses come readily and naturally under control. Carnal pleasures become more and more insipid as Divine love grows in your heart."

How to love God and surrender to Him whom we have never seen is a question that often arises in our mind. To some such query of a devotee Swami Adbhutananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, replied:

"It does not matter if you do not know Him. You know His Name. Just take His Name, and you will progress spiritually. What do they do in an office? Without having seen or known the officer, one sends an application addressed to his name. Similarly send your application to God, and you will receive His grace."

The answer was characteristic of Swami Adbhutananda, temperamentally a man of simplicity and faith. Though a simple answer, it satisfied the inquirer, for it carried the strength that is in the words of a man of realisation.

This assertion of the Swami, however, is corroborated by the scriptures, where the Divine Name has been considered identical with the Deity it signifies. It is not merely a combination of letters. It is both the means and the goal. Words, especially the syllable Om, have been designated as Brahman by the Vedas. All scriptures glorify Holy Names. Every religious discipline prescribes the Name of God for repetition. Its efficacy is recognized by all faiths. Theistic religions specially recommend it to their votaries. In Hinduism even the Advaita system of philosophy, which does not recognize the ultimate separate existence of a personal God, appreciates the value of the repetition of God's Names as a purifying act.

In the theistic faiths, however, its place is significantly important. Of all the systems it is the Vaishnavite School of Sri Chaitanya, which has laid particular stress on the Divine Name and has raised its repetition to the status of an independent spiritual practice.

Sri Chaitanya, the founder of Bengali Vaishnavism, has himself composed a few verses singing the glory of the Name which forms a cardinal doctrine of his system. In the first verse of his Sikshastaka, he speaks about the nature of Name and the efficacy of its repetition:

Chant the name of the Lord and His Glory unceasingly,

That the mirror of the heart may be wiped clean,

And quench that mighty forest fire,

Worldly lust, raging furiously within.

Oh Name, stream down in moonlight on the lotus heart,

Opening its cup to knowledge of Thyself.

Oh self, drown deep in the waves of His bliss,

Chanting His Name continually,

Tasting His nectar at every step,

Bathing in His Name, that bath for weary souls.

He also says that the Lord's Name is to be always sung by one who is humbler than even a blade of grass, with more endurance than that of a tree and who, being himself devoid of conceit, bestows honour on others.

Man seeks refuge in God's name also when he is confronted with difficult situations or involved in crises. Innumerable stories are extant which go to illustrate this fact. When Draupadi was being subjected to insult and humiliation in the court of the Kauravas it was Krishna's name that saved her honour. When Radha, the cowherdess of Vrndavana, was asked, as a test of her chastity, to bring water in a multi-holed pitcher it was with the name of the Lord that she came off more glorious than ever, out of this fiery ordeal. The great hero of the Ramayana, whom Tulsidas calls the 'jewel in the great garland of Ramayana', Hanuman, crossed the ocean to Lanka merely by taking the name of Rama.

Though it is said that chanting or repeating the name of God is enough it must be understood rightly. Undoubtedly there is an inherent power in the name of God. Even if one chants it mechanically it will save one in course of time. In fact many aspirants do japa only mechanically. There is little or no intensity or feeling in it. That is why little progress is seen in their lives.

Concerning this a great poet-saint, Kabir, has warned us against the complacency and self-satisfaction that may be indulged in by the mere mechanical repetition of the name. He says:

"The remembrance of God is not achieved

By the revolving of beads in the hand,

By the rolling of the tongue in the mouth,

Or, by the wandering of the mind in all quarters."

Yet there is hope even for those who take God's name mechanically:

Disciple: "Is it of any use to be merely repeating His Name without intense devotion?"

Holy Mother: "Whether you jump into water or are pushed into it, your cloth will get drenched. Is it not so? Repeat the Name of God, whether your mind is concentrated or not. It will be good for you if you can repeat the Name of God for a fixed number of times daily."

However it would be far more profitable if one chants the name of God with faith, love and longing. Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes intense yearning:

Goswami: "Sir, the chanting of God's name is enough. The scriptures emphasize the sanctity of God's name for the Kaliyuga."

Master: "Yes, there is no doubt about the sanctity of God's name. But can a mere name achieve anything, without the yearning love of the devotee behind it? One should feel great restlessness of soul for the vision of God. Suppose a man repeats the name of God mechanically, while his mind is absorbed in 'lust and gold', can he achieve anything?"

"Therefore I say, chant the name of God, and with it pray to Him that you may have love for Him. Pray to God that your attachment to such transitory things as wealth, name, and creature comforts may become less and less every day."

The scriptures and saints tell us that there is a tremendous joy in God's name, for God is of the nature of Bliss; He is Satchidananda. A beginner, however, does not experience any joy. On the contrary he may feel only dryness. It is not the fault of God's name. The fault lies in the mind of the devotee. As long as the mind has not turned away from worldly delights it is not possible to taste divine bliss. One must try to develop discrimination and dispassion for the world. Only when the mind is purified of worldly dross does one begin to taste the joy of divine name. One must pray to God with yearning for getting rid of desires and for getting delight in His name:

Devotee: "How can I take delight in God's name?"

Master: "Pray to God with a yearning heart that you may take delight in His name. He will certainly fulfil your heart's desire."

So saying, Sri Ramakrishna sang a song in his sweet voice, pleading with the Divine Mother to show Her grace to suffering men.

Then he said: "Even for Thy holy name I have no taste. A typhoid patient has very little chance of recovery if he loses all taste for food; but his life need not be despaired of if he enjoys food even a little, that is why one should cultivate a taste for God's name. Any name will do Durga, Krishna, or Siva. Then if, through the chanting of the name, one's attachment to God grows day by day, and joy fills the soul, one has nothing to fear. The delirium will certainly disappear; the grace of God will certainly descend."

Utmost caution and guidance are required to chant the Name effectively. When one chants it with due regard and propriety, said Swami Vivekananda once, one can have both devotion and knowledge through it. We have to impress on our

minds that purity of thought and sincerity of purpose are the essential conditions one has to achieve and develop in the religious life if it is to be expeditiously fruitful. An aspirant must practise self-control. He has to avoid all slips in ethical life and should live a life of discipline. These are the sine qua non of the higher life, and it is well-known that nothing will happen if spiritual disciplines are practised perfunctorily. When that purity of purpose and sincerity in sadhana is achieved and when one tries in secret and in solitude and with single-minded devotion to repeat the name of God, His vision will come and the devotee will get absorbed in Him. This chanting of God's name must form a regular habit.

Sri Ramakrishna says: "And one must always chant the name and glories of God and pray to Him. An old metal pot must be scrubbed every day. What is the use of cleaning it only once? Further, one must practise discrimination and renunciation; one must be conscious of the unreality of the world.

"One should constantly repeat the name of God. The name of God is highly effective in the Kaliyuga (iron age). The practice of yoga is not possible in this age, for the life of a man depends on food. Clap your hands while repeating God's name, and the birds of your sin will fly away."

A devotee asked, "Mother, what is the secret?" Holy Mother pointed to a small clock in a niche and said, "As that timepiece is ticking, so also go on repeating God's Name. That will bring you everything. Nothing more need be done. While performing Japa, take the Name of God with utmost love, sincerity, and self-surrender. Before commencing your meditation daily, first think of your utter helplessness in this world and then slowly begin the practice of Sadhana as directed by your Guru."

The Master: "Ecstatic devotion develops in taking the Name of the Lord, eyes overflow tears of joy, words are choked in the mouth, and all the hairs of the body stand erect thrilled with joy.

Devotee: But I do not find delight in His name.

The Master: Then pray with a yearning heart that He may teach you to relish His name. Undoubtedly He will grant your prayer. . . . I say, "Find joy in his name." Durga, Krishna, Siva any name will do. And if you daily feel a greater attraction for taking His name and a greater joy in it, you need fear no more. The delirium must get cured, and His grace will surely descend on you.

"Japa means repeating the name of the Lord silently, sitting in a quiet place. If one continues the repetition with concentration and devotion, one is sure to be blessed with Divine visions ultimately one is sure to have God-realisation. Suppose a big log of wood is immersed in the Ganges with one end attached to a chain, which is fixed on the bank. Following the chain, link by link, you can gradually dive into the water and trace your way to it. In the same manner, if you become absorbed in the repetition of His holy name, you will eventually realise Him."

According to Vaishnavism the Divine Name must be taken without committing ten faults. These are: (1) disparaging genuine devotees, (2) regarding God as absolutely different from His Names, Form, Qualities, etc., (3) showing disrespect for one's spiritual preceptor, (4) speaking too lightly or contemptuously of the sacred scriptures, (5) considering the glory of the Divine Name mentioned in the scriptures as mere eulogy, (6) considering the Divine Name as imaginary, (7) committing sins repeatedly and intentionally on the strength of the Divine Name, (8) regarding the repetition of the Divine Name as equal to other spiritual practices, (9) imparting it to unworthy persons, (10) wanting taste for the chanting or hearing of the Divine Name even after listening to its excellencies.

These faults however will be rectified by chanting the Divine Name itself. As Padma purana puts it: The sins of those who commit offence to the Divine Name is remedied by the Name alone. And it bears the desired fruit if taken constantly.

If one chants the name of God sincerely with faith, feeling, and yearning, and takes care to avoid the faults mentioned above, one is sure to progress in spiritual life, obtain His grace and attain Him in time.

"Keep holy company; and now and then visit God's devotees and holy men. The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities. The companionship of the holy and the wise is one of the main elements of spiritual progress." This is the second commandment of Sri Ramakrishna. Man is a gregarious animal. He wants friends and companions to share his feelings, thoughts, joys and sorrows. Even saints and people advanced in spiritual life desire the association of similar minded people. Sri Ramakrishna prayed for a pure soul as his companion and obtained Swami Brahmananda. For spiritual aspirants holy association is indispensable. Sri Ramakrishna compares holy men to physicians and says that unless aspirants keep holy company constantly their worldliness which has become chronic cannot be cured. The wicked get transformed into good people or even become saints by the potent influence of holy company. Saint Tulasidas, in his Ramcharitmanas bestows high praise on the benefits of holy company. He says: "The association of holy men can turn a crow into a cuckoo and a heron into a swan. As iron is transformed into gold by the touch of the philosophers' stone, so is the transformation that takes place by contact with a saint." He goes so far as to say: "If the joys of heaven and salvation could be weighed together in a balance, they would not equal the happiness that results from a moment of Satsanga (holy company)". Once in the course of conversation with devotees Sri Ramakrishna observed: "I visited the museum once. I was shown the fossils. A whole animal has become stone! Just see what an effect has been produced by company! Likewise, by constantly living in the company of a holy man one verily becomes holy."

There is a Sanskrit verse which says: "Even a moment's association with the holy becomes a boat which takes one across the sea of transmigration." This is not a

mere panegyric. Innumerable instances can be cited of the transformation of sinners into saints by mere association. The devotees of Sri Ramakrishna may recall how a thief became a saint by coming into contact with Pavahari baba. Kalipada Ghosh turned over a new leaf by the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna. Amjad the robber became a good man by the grace of Holy Mother Sarada Devi. Who knows how many such incidents remain unknown to us! Sri Ramakrishna also used to say : "If the aspirant thirsting after self-improvement mixes indiscriminately with all sorts of worldly people, not only does he lose his ideal, but also his former faith, love and zeal; they die away imperceptibly. The society of pious men is like the water in which rice is washed. This rice-water has the potency of dissipating alcoholic intoxication. The society of the pious relieves worldly men, drunk with the wine of vain desires, of their intoxication." That is why he recommends the cultivation of holy company so strongly. The Sanskrit word for holy company is Sat-sanga. The word sanga means company, and sat means good, truth, and God. To seek the company of the holy means to become good, to observe truthfulness, and to thirst after truth and God. Invariably one who keeps good company, first becomes good, pure, unselfish, and kind. Then he becomes sincere and truthful; after that he becomes a seeker of Truth and God. He practises japa, prayer, meditation etc; he experiences constantly the presence of God. In the end he obtains the grace of God and realises Him as the Self of his self. The effect of Satsanga is incalculable. We live in the midst of an adverse environment saturated with materialism and atheism. Added to that we also bring our own past impressions which constantly are trying to pull us down. There will also be times when we feel depressed, frustrated and likely to lose our enthusiasm. Then there are the inevitable events of life - accidents, death, pain and suffering. Under these circumstances the difficulty of keeping our faith in God and higher ideals is easily imagined. In these trying times the company of the holy and pious can help us a great deal. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "Bondage and liberation are of the mind alone. The mind will take the colour you dye it with. It is like white clothes just returned from the laundry. If you dip them in red dye, they will be red. If you dip them in blue or green, they will be blue or green. They will take only the colour you dip them in, whatever it may be." Holy company makes one holy. The need for holy company has been emphasised by all religions. Not only is holy company necessary, it is impossible to progress in spiritual life without it, says Vedanta. To emphasize this point the following story was narrated: Uma was the Universal Mother incarnated as the daughter of Himavan. She blessed her father with the vision of the several manifestations of the omnipotent Mother. Himavan, highly pleased, asked his daughter to help him have the realisation of Brahman. Uma replied, "O Father, if you wish to realize Brahman, you must live in the company of holy men - men who have entirely given up the world." It is not easy to get holy company. Even confirmed non-dualist that he was, Sri Sankara has affirmed that there are three things which are hard to acquire and can be had only by God's especial grace, and these three are : human birth, an intense yearning for liberation and the association of a great soul. Narada in his Bhakti Sutras makes a reference to the companionship of the holy and points out that this companionship creates a rare opportunity; its influence is subtle and difficult to comprehend. It is obtainable only

by the grace of God, but once obtained its effect is unfailing. Holy company is a wonderful uplifter, for it exercises a silent and lasting influence for good on all sincere recipients. However it is not easy to recognise a holy man, for he does not go about advertising himself. He does not assume false glories, rather he likes to remain incognito, to stay in the background. Sometimes he appears very ordinary and commonplace; at other times he even behaves in a queer way to keep intruders out. It is therefore not an easy thing to recognise a great soul. It is only as a result of the cumulative effect of merit earned in many births that one comes across a holy man. But there is no need to despair. There is a law which sees to it that the earnest seeker does come by his guide. As Swami Vivekananda says when the field is ready the seed must come. What are the benefits of holy company? It gives inspiration, and guidance. Holy company makes one aware of one's faults and one will make the necessary correction. The biography of Sri Ramakrishna narrates many incidents of how he used to correct Swami Yogananda, Swami Niranananda and other disciples and devotees and put them on the right road. We can find similar incidents in the lives of every saint. The life of every saint acts like a powerful search-light illuminating the path to God. In the company of holy men one understands scriptures in the right way, for as Sri Ramakrishna used to say, scriptures contain both sand and sugar i.e., essentials and non-essentials. One needs right guidance to understand and apply them correctly. Then one is able to understand the nature of the world, life, its meaning, the goal of life and the best way of reaching it. In the company of a holy man one is inundated with peace and an indefinable bliss, for holy men radiate peace and bliss. Swami Turiyananda used to say that one visit to Sri Ramakrishna used to inebriate him with bliss for days and days. Many people used to visit Ramana Maharshi with their minds full of doubts and questions, but once in his presence all their doubts disappeared and all questions ceased. Holy men are free of egotism and their hearts are filled with loving compassion. Hence their company helps one reduce the ego, the root cause of all bondage. Holy company spontaneously brings the thought of God into one's mind. Sri Chaitanya states: "Know him to be a holy man whose mere sight produces in the beholder a spontaneous devotion to the Lord." What can be achieved only with great difficulty and by hard practice for a long time can easily be obtained in the company of holy men. The company of the holy gives strength in times of depression and low periods. In the presence of a holy man lust, envy, anger etc. cannot raise their heads. Once a disciple of Swami Brahmananda wanted to test his Guru. In his presence this disciple deliberately tried to think worldly thoughts but failed. Then he realised how powerful and uplifting was the presence of these great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Above all a saint by his grace can even grant the vision of God, for as Narada states there is no difference between God and His devotees. As Vedanta also asserts, a knower of Brahman becomes Brahman. An illumined person's will is merged in the universal will; he becomes a perfect instrument of God. Hence whatever he does is really an act of God. We can now see why Sri Ramakrishna instructs us to cultivate holy company. But there may be a difficulty. It is rare to obtain the constant company of a holy man. And then even if we are fortunate in coming into contact with a holy man it may be for a short time only. What then should we do? Holy

company means not only the companionship of saints. Anything that inspires and propels one toward a nobler goal, towards God, is holy company. It could be a book, or a place or an object. Every religion insists on the study of scriptures and pilgrimage. A devout study of scriptures and the lives and teachings of saints and sages is a wonderful way of having their holy company. These have the power of truth and truth always uplifts and inspires every one. The study of these holy books instantly transports us into the presence of these great souls. For example when we read the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna we can palpably feel his presence immediately. Regular study of the scriptures slowly brings about an inner transformation. The places and objects associated with holy men can also act as powerful uplifters. Visiting holy places definitely raises our minds. Clothes, rosaries, or sandals and other objects associated with saints also remind us of their life and help us. This is why relics (not merely for their apparent miraculous powers) are cherished so devoutly by devotees all over the world. Even certain events can help us turn towards a higher goal. Many aspirants are advised to visit now and then crematoriums, hospitals and lunatic asylums. These visits can bring to our minds vividly the evanescence of life, check our mad rush after fleeting sense pleasures, and produce dispassion and discrimination. We also learn to count our blessings and appreciate the grace of God in having a healthy body and mind; we are reminded of the preciousness of time and opportunity given us. But the best holy company is the practice of the presence of God in our hearts. Constant prayer, japa, and remembrance unveils the Lord who is present at all times and at all places. To feel the presence of God this is the true meaning of Satsanga. All the other means discussed earlier are only helps toward reaching this goal. Until we achieve this we are advised to take recourse to all the other means mentioned earlier. Thus we can see how the cultivation of holy company confers so many blessings and is so very necessary in spiritual life. We can ignore it only at our peril.

"The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities; it is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God. To fix the mind on God is very difficult, in the beginning, unless one practises meditation in solitude. When a tree is young it should be fenced all around; otherwise it may be destroyed by cattle." This was the third commandment of Sri Ramakrishna. The tradition of retiring into solitude is immemorial. As soon as his temple duties were over Sri Ramakrishna would retire into the surrounding jungle for practising meditation. Most of his disciples wandered off to the Himalayas, and to various other holy places to perform hard austerities. Many early Christian holy men took to the deserts and engaged themselves in a life of unceasing prayer and contemplation. Later they became known as the desert fathers. Christ went into the desert and prayed for forty days. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "The rishis of old attained the Knowledge of Brahman. One cannot have this so long as there is the slightest trace of worldliness. How hard

the rishis laboured! Early in the morning they would go away from the hermitage, and would spend the whole day in solitude, meditating on Brahman. At night they would return to the hermitage and eat a little fruit or roots. They kept their minds aloof from the objects of sight, hearing, touch, and other things of a worldly nature. Only thus did they realize Brahman as their own inner consciousness." Religion apart, solitude is a need felt in all thoughtful vocations. Great writers, scientists, artists - all labour hard in solitude. In every case solitude is a thing that cannot be dispensed with. When we see that even in secular life solitude is so necessary, we must pause to ask : how much more earnestly should not the religious seek it? As soon as we think about solitude the first thing that comes to our mind is a place which has the least disturbance: no people, no sounds, no duties and responsibilities, and above all no worries or anxieties - relatively speaking a place which affords us a sense of restfulness and freedom. Solitude is a place where we can afford to be ourselves. In our day to day life, rarely have we a chance of being ourselves. Invariably we are forced to act and react according to the dictates of society. Our attitudes, likes, dislikes, duties, responsibilities, relationships, desires and expectations - all these influence our behaviour forcing us to be other than what we would like to be. Such a situation is not conducive to prayer and contemplation. However this is only the external and easier part of solitude. True solitude is to live for God, with God, in God. Solitude is a way of living totally dependent on God. If one goes to a lonely spot with an abundance of provisions it does not become a solitary life but turns out to be a pleasant picnic. To be worthy of its name one should not be looking forward, even unconsciously, to a return to the worldly way of life. Solitude is a state of mind devoid of imaginations and thoughts and memories excepting that of God. The specific word Sri Ramakrishna used was nirjanata i.e. a place where there are no people. He is not referring merely to the absence of people or to the absence of noise. Primarily he is indicating that one should give up dependence on any person or thing except God. He says: "If you desire to live in the world unattached, you should first practise devotion in solitude for some time, a year, six months, a month, or at least twelve days. During this period of retirement, you should constantly meditate upon God and pray to Him for Divine love. You should think that there is nothing in the world which you may call your own, that those whom you consider as your own are sure to pass away some day or other. God alone is really your own. He is your all-in-all. How to obtain Him? - this should be your only concern." "It is good that you should often retire into solitude in a place away from either men or women; a place where you may be left absolutely to yourself, praying to the Lord with a yearning heart for true knowledge; a place where you may stay at least for three days, if not more, or for at least one day, if not three." In solitude we must be able to give up dependence on books, music, and even the comfort of a well laid out routine. It may be difficult at the beginning but that is what one should be able to achieve. Only then can one turn to God for everything. Solitude, ultimately, is complete surrender to God. Naturally this involves living in the simplest manner possible. Silence is the very heart of solitude. Silence is not making the mind empty; it is the art of emptying the mind of all worldly thoughts and filling it with spiritual thoughts, thoughts of God. True

silence is to feel the divine presence intensely and constantly. In solitude one is forced to confront oneself. For many this is most painful. One can easily know one's capacity, weaknesses, what thoughts are predominant etc, how much time we are capable of keeping silent and thinking of God. There are many distractions all around us. Solitude is a great help in acquiring concentration. Without concentration it is impossible to progress in either secular or spiritual life. Man's greatness in any field is an indication of his or her power of concentration. Sri Ramakrishna says: "But one must go into solitude to attain this divine love. To get butter from milk you must let it set into curd in a secluded spot: if it is too much disturbed, milk won't turn into curd. Next, you must put aside all other duties, sit in a quiet spot, and churn the curd. Only then do you get butter. Further, by meditating on God in solitude the mind acquires knowledge, dispassion, and devotion. But the very same mind goes downward if it dwells in the world. Only when we try to practise concentration do we find how difficult it is. The famous psychologist Eric Fromm equates concentration with solitude. He says: "The most important step in learning concentration is to learn to be alone with oneself without reading, listening to the radio, smoking or drinking. Indeed, to be able to concentrate means to be able to be alone with oneself - and this ability is precisely a condition for the ability to love. If I am attached to another person because I cannot stand on my own feet, he or she may be a life saver, but the relationship is not one of love. Paradoxically, the ability to be alone is the condition for the ability to love. Anyone who tries to be alone with himself will discover how difficult it is. He will begin to feel restless, fidgety, or even to sense considerable anxiety. He will be prone to rationalise his unwillingness to go on with this practice by thinking that it has no value, is just silly, that it takes too much time, and so on, and so on. He will also observe that all sorts of thoughts come to his mind which take possession of him. He will find himself thinking about his plans for later in the day, or about some difficulty in a job he has to do, or where to go in the evening, or about any number of things that will fill his mind - rather than permitting it to empty itself." (The Art of Loving) However difficult, the only way is to practice and persevere. In the world we take many things for granted. Only when we try to live a simple life in solitude do we appreciate our blessings. Consequently we learn to be grateful for the many blessings of life. Solitude also helps us appreciate the goodness of others. Solitude is man's most valuable treasure. It will not be wrong to say that, rightly practised, solitude bestows both physical and mental health. Above all solitude gives us the opportunity for reflecting on the most important questions of life. Who am I? Why am I here? What is life? What is its meaning? What is my goal? What do I really want? How am I supposed to lead my life? How am I to respond to the vagaries of life? What are my priorities, my weaknesses? How can I improve myself? Solitude is a great boon making us turn our attention inward and giving us an opportunity to ponder over these important questions of life and evolve a plan of action. However it is not easy to live in solitude; we cannot just make a quick plan and go! It needs long, and often many years of conscious preparation. Real taste for solitude is generated only when the clamourings of the senses are silenced and the senses themselves are rudely shocked out of their gear through the blows the mind receives or the sufferings the body

endures. When this taste develops and is directed towards God a greater part of the battle is won. But mind being what it is, it requires constant watching and hard practice. There are three types of solitude: 1)external, 2)internal, and 3) with the Self. Sri Ramakrishna was very emphatic about having recourse to solitude for the purpose of practising spiritual disciplines. He says that one should practise meditation in the forest, in a secluded corner of the house or in the mind. When one has an opportunity one should retire to an undisturbed place, preferably a quiet and beautiful place; places of natural beauty have a great power of calming and uplifting the mind. That is why many holy temples were built in places of great beauty - on the tops of great mountains, in deep forests, on the banks of mighty rivers etc. We have already discussed a little about this type of external solitude. One can and must have daily solitude right in one's house. A sincere aspirant should set aside some time daily for spiritual practice. He should sit in a quiet corner of the house and should try to call on God, even if it be for a short time only. He should consider this period of time absolutely as his own and should never allow anyone or anything to interfere with his practice; he should call on God whole-heartedly feeling that he has no one whom he could call his own except God. This is the internal and daily solitude. Then comes real solitude, living with Atman or Self. Solitude with Atman is to feel the presence of God constantly and uninterruptedly. This comes only after long and hard spiritual practice and as the result of the grace of God. Once a man has achieved this he has nothing more to do. He lives enjoying His presence always. This is the state of perfection. Br Lawrence says: "Having found in many books different methods of going to God, and divers practices of the spiritual life, I thought this would serve rather to puzzle me, than facilitate what I sought after, which was nothing but how to become wholly God's. This made me resolve to give the all for the All: so after having given myself wholly to God, to make all the satisfaction I could for my sins, I renounced, for the love of Him, everything that was not He; and I began to live as if there was none but He and I in the world. Such was my beginning; and yet I must tell you, that for the first ten years I suffered much: the apprehension that I was not devoted to God, as I wished to be, my past sins always present to my mind, and the great unmerited favours which God did me, were the matter and source of my sufferings. When I thought of nothing but to end my days in these troubles (which did not at all diminish the trust I had in God, and which served only to increase my faith), I found myself changed all at once; and my soul, which till that time was in trouble, felt a profound inward peace, as if she were in her centre and place of rest. Ever since that time I walk before God simply, in faith, with humility and with love; and I apply myself diligently to do nothing and think nothing which may displease Him." How long should one practise solitude? Sri Ramakrishna remarks, "If you ask me how long you should live in solitude away from your family, I should say that it would be good for you if you could spend even one day in such a manner. Three days at a time are still better. One may live in solitude for twelve days, a month, three months, or a year, according to one's convenience and ability." This advice he gives to householders who cannot devote all their time to God. What then to speak of aspirants who have forsaken their all for the sake of God? Sri Ramakrishna's advice on how to practice solitude: he exhorts :

"When you practise discipline in solitude, keep yourself entirely away from your family. You must not allow your wife, son, daughter, mother, father, sister, brother, friends, or relatives near you. While thus practising discipline in solitude, you should think , 'I have no one else in the world. God is my all'. Continuing, Sri Ramakrishna remarks, "The mind is like milk. If you keep the mind in the world, which is like water, then the milk and water will get mixed. That is why people keep milk in a quiet place and let it set into curd, and then churn butter from it. Likewise, through spiritual discipline practised in solitude, churn the butter of knowledge and devotion from the milk of the mind. Then that butter can easily be kept in the water of the world. It will not get mixed with the world. The mind will float detached on the water of the world." But solitude frightens. What is the cause of this fear? Man has long been accustomed to live in groups, in constant activity and turmoil. He is addicted to the charms of society so much that he finds it difficult to live alone. Swami Vivekananda says: "Can a man who has been used to the turmoil and the rush of life live at ease if he comes to a quiet place? He suffers and perchance he may lose his mind." The Brihadaranyaka Upanisad gives a description of how Prajapati also, at the beginning of creation, was deluded and afraid. It says : In the beginning this (universe) was only the self (Viraj), of human form. He reflected and found nothing else but himself. ... At this he was afraid. Therefore even now a solitary one is afraid. He then reflected, "As there is none else than myself what am I afraid of?" On reflecting thus fear left him, for what was there to fear? It is from a second entity alone that fear comes." Sankara in his commentary on these verses says : "Because this Purusa was endowed with a body and limbs, he was afraid of his extinction, owing to a false notion. And as, in our case, the way he adopted to get rid of this false notion, which was the cause of fear, was by acquiring the right knowledge of the Atman." Sankara here states that we too are deluded by the false notion of our extinction with the death of the body and the only way to get over this fear is to know our Atman in its true perspective. And right knowledge can be acquired by contemplating in solitude on the teachings of the scriptures. One may go mad if one enters into solitude unprepared. Certain thoughts, memories, may become prominent, even obsessive. That is why without some preparation one is not advised to go into solitude. It is possible that many people attuned as they are to the hectic life of the present civilization may feel one with the idea expressed in Cowper's poem :

O Solitude, where are the charms

That sages have seen in thy face?

Better to live in the midst of alarms

Than dwell in this horrible place.'

(Alexander Selkirk, Stanza 1.)

The same rule applies to retired life also. Many people plan in their imagination to spend longer periods of time in spiritual practice after retirement. This becomes possible only if one starts preparing early in life. Sri Ramakrishna's advice for the spiritual aspirants to retire into solitude now and then is a commandment. Some may think of it as unnecessary by touting the name of Karma Yoga; others by saying that after all the mind is the root cause of bondage and liberation, therefore, if we can watch the mind it would be fine. All this may be true. Or it may be we are just deluding ourselves; and we can only do so at the cost of our spiritual life. Hence retiring into solitude now and then is indispensable.

"...you must practise discrimination... 'lust and gold' is impermanent. God is the only Eternal Substance. What does a man get with money? Food, clothes, and a dwelling-place - nothing more. You cannot realize God with its help. Therefore money can never be the goal of life. That is the process of discrimination. "As soon as a man finds his mind wandering away to the unreal, he should apply discrimination. The moment an elephant stretches out its trunk to eat a plantain-tree in a neighbour's garden, it gets a blow from the iron goad of the driver." (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)

This was the fourth commandment of Sri Ramakrishna. Discrimination is the faculty of distinguishing the higher from the lower, right from wrong, the sacred from the profane, and living that life. It is not mere intellectual gymnastics. Right understanding without the effort to lead an appropriate life is not only useless; it is dangerous and results in much suffering. Discrimination should be followed by dispassion and self-control. Blessed are those who have discrimination. It is the lamp that burns brightly in the hearts of all good and happy people; it lights up the path of life and gently leads one to God. Right discrimination results in peace, joy and Self-knowledge.

Discrimination is there in the heart of every creature helping it survive and thrive. But it is only in man that discrimination attains a glory that is unsurpassed; for it leads man to Self-knowledge and absolute freedom. Without it man cannot be happy even in worldly life, not to speak of attaining any spiritual success. All successful people whether spiritual or secular, possess it in a greater degree. Most people, though, use it for worldly ends.

Needless to say discrimination is indispensable in spiritual life. According to Shankaracharya, Viveka or discrimination is one of the foremost requisites for treading the path of knowledge; it is indispensable whatever be the path we tread. Shankara defines it thus: "A firm conviction of the mind to the effect that Brahman is real and the universe unreal." (Vivekachudamani) This process of discrimination is useful only for those who are far advanced in spiritual life. Most of us are far from it; we are not aware of what is unreal even though we are living in its very midst, not to speak of what is Real. And so it does not really concern us at this stage. What is

useful for us is to find out what makes us sane, rational, strong, pure, cheerful, balanced and truthful.

Without discrimination man can never make progress. One of the reasons why so many aspirants make little or no progress in spite of many years of regular practice is due to the lack of discrimination.

Four things are necessary to be able to discriminate properly: awareness, rationality, a well-defined goal, and sufficient will power. The faculty of discrimination will be absent or does not help us if these four requirements are not met. The very first requirement is awareness. Most of us wade through life as sleep-walkers, doing things mechanically, blissfully unaware of what is being done. Laya (sleep) or mechanical spiritual practice is one of the very first obstacles to Yoga. Until one develops the habit of doing everything with awareness there will be little or no progress. If only we can cultivate the habit of keeping a watch on whatever we do - whether it is talking, reading, cooking or meditating - a lot of problems, both physical and mental, can be avoided; certainly it saves time, money and effort.

"Even though it was the Master's Day of Silence a traveller begged for a word of wisdom that would guide him through life's journey. The Master nodded affably, took a sheet of paper and wrote a single word on it: "Awareness." The visitor was perplexed. "That's too brief. Would you please expand on it a bit?" The Master took the paper back and wrote: "Awareness, awareness, awareness." "But what do these words mean?" said the stranger helplessly. The Master reached out for the paper and wrote: "Awareness, awareness, awareness means AWARENESS." (One Minute Wisdom, p.9, by Anthony de Mello, S.J.)

Psychology tells us that by just being aware of our thoughts, emotions, motives and actions many a problem can be nipped in the bud. Even if the problem persists it would be easier to deal with and much suffering could be avoided. One of the functions of the teacher is to keep a watch over the aspirant's behaviour and warn him of the impending trouble even before it surfaces. Here the teacher is doing what the aspirant should have done himself. One develops awareness through constant practice; there is no short-cut.

The second requirement is to use reason and develop rationality.

`Hunger, sleep, insecurity and sex urge are common to men and animals but the understanding of dharma is the extra quality of man which makes what a man is'. (Hitopadesa) Without dharma he is just an animal. The word dharma may be loosely translated as right conduct and behaviour, which is the result of right knowledge. And right knowledge can only be got from being rational. To be rational means to be objective, fair and just. It is also the only way of doing anything rightly. `Man is a rational animal' is a well known adage, but experience shows human beings are rarely rational. St Francis de Sales, the admirable and practical teacher that he was, puts it so succinctly thus: "We are human only because of our reason, and yet it is very rare to find people who are truly reasonable. Self-love frequently falsifies rationality and leads it into a thousand kinds of injustices which, though often small, are nonetheless dangerous. We fault our neighbour for a trifle, but excuse ourselves for a major fault; we desire to sell for a good price, but to buy at a bargain; we demand that justice be meted out in the house of another, but want

mercy in our own; we wish people to take our remarks in the right light, but we are sensitive and prickly about what is said to us; ...If we take an aversion to someone, no matter what he does, we find him at fault and ceaselessly badger and annoy him. We are punctilious about maintaining our rank, but want others to be humble and accommodating. We readily complain about our neighbour, but are annoyed when he complains about us. What we do for another always seems considerable to us, but what he does for us always seems insignificant. Be just in all your actions; always put yourself in your neighbour's place, and put your neighbour in yours, and then you will judge fairly. Imagine yourself the seller when buying, and the buyer when selling, and then you will sell and buy fairly. We lose nothing by living generously, nobly, courteously, with a royal, just and rational heart. Examine your heart often to be assured that it is behaving toward your neighbour as you would want his to behave toward you. Therein lies true reason." (Introduction to *The Divine Life*, pp.249-250, by St. Francis de Sales) Most of the ills and suffering in the world can be attributed to irrationality. The root cause of irrationality is narcissism. Would to God more of us were more rational and reasonable! On this admirable quality Eric Fromm has this to say: "The narcissistic orientation is one in which one experiences as real only that which exists within oneself, while the phenomena in the outside world have no reality in themselves, but are experienced only from the viewpoint of their being useful or dangerous to one. The opposite pole to narcissism is objectivity; it is the faculty to see people and things as they are, objectively, and to be able to separate this objective picture from a picture which is formed by one's desires and fears. All forms of psychosis show the inability to be objective, to an extreme degree. For the insane person, the only reality that exists is that within him, that of his fears and desires. He sees the world outside as symbols of his inner world, as his creation. All of us do the same when we dream. In the dream we produce events, we stage dramas, which are the expression of our wishes and fears (although sometimes also of our insights and judgement), and while we are asleep we are convinced that the product of our dreams is as real as the reality which we perceive in our waking state. The insane person or the dreamer fails completely in having an objective view of the world outside; but all of us are more or less insane, or more or less asleep; all of us have an unobjective view of the world, one which is distorted by our narcissistic orientation." (*The Art of Loving*, pp. 98-99, by Eric Fromm) Needless to say without rationality we cannot overcome our narcissism, we wouldn't even be human. The third requirement is a well-defined goal. While it is true that discrimination becomes effective only after we have a goal, it is also true that discrimination itself will not function without having at least some idea about our goal. An ideal or a goal gives a purpose and meaning to life; it helps us release our energies and potentialities. Without a goal all our activities become desultory, and energies become scattered. A goal also serves as a way of measuring our progress. Without a set goal any talk of progress is meaningless. Even in this world a higher type of goal brings a lot of peace and joy. It is a common experience that even a little achievement towards a good goal gives us a sense of well-being not to be had by any amount of sense enjoyment. If this be the case we can imagine the joy and peace an aspirant is likely to experience when he has God-realisation as his goal. Sincere

effort, however small, brings immense satisfaction immediately. Without a definite goal and a strong desire for attaining it discrimination does not help. Many aspirants after reading a few books jump to the conclusion that God-realisation is the goal and focus all their attention on it. Though this is the ultimate goal it is well to bear in mind it is a long term goal to be attained only after many lives of intense effort. What should concern us right now and is helpful is to have short term goals that can take us to the next higher step. These goals include overcoming defects like hatred, jealousy, waste of time and energy in frivolous talking and useless activities. If we look objectively at our way of life we will be surprised at the many undesirable traits we cherish. Without getting rid of these no advancement is possible however much japa or meditation we may do. One of the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna used to say often 'that rowing an anchored boat is useless'. Swami Brahmananda's advice in this regard is an indispensable must for every spiritual aspirant: "Every night before you go to sleep, think for a while how much time you have spent in doing good deeds and how much time you have wasted; how much time you have spent in meditation and how much you have wasted in idleness. Make your mind strong through the observance of continence and the practice of meditation. You cannot buy God. His vision comes only through his grace. Does this mean that you should not practice spiritual disciplines? Certainly you must practice, otherwise passions will create havoc in you. A rich man employs a porter whose duty it is to see that neither thieves, nor cows, nor sheep, nor any other intruder enter the compound. Man's mind is his porter, and the stronger the mind becomes, the better." (The Eternal Companion, p.197) The fourth requirement is a strong will. Oscar Wilde's quip, 'I can resist anything but temptation' is a truism for most of us. If we give in to temptation what else is there to resist? Temptations, pitfalls and suffering in life are unavoidable. They are, in fact, our best friends in spiritual life; but for them all of us would be saints! What separates a saint from a worldly man is suffering and temptation. If life is all joy and sweetness we will be forever stuck in this mire of samsara. Miseries and temptations give us an invaluable opportunity of proving our mettle and strengthening our will-power; these are the very steps of the spiritual ladder leading to Self-knowledge. No one is born with an irresistible will as a fatuous gift from God. As we go on developing the habit of exercising our will it grows. In course of time it becomes strong enough to help us overcome greater pitfalls and move forward towards our goal. Life affords us daily more than enough opportunities of exercising our will. The best way of developing a strong will is to accept the situations of life cheerfully, with equanimity, and to strive to move towards God with patience and perseverance. Regular practice of japa, prayer, meditation, study of scriptures and the discharging of all our duties as an offering to God - all this will gradually but unfailingly make our will strong. Awareness, rationality, a well defined goal, and sufficient will-power - when these four requirements are met the faculty of discrimination blossoms forth and becomes an aspirant's best friend. Soon it leads to right knowledge and is invariably followed by Vairagya or dispassion. Dispassion is an instinctive rejection as poison of all that stands as an obstruction in our path. The test of true discrimination is dispassion; a discrimination which is not accompanied by dispassion is worthless. Discrimination

is an indispensable practice in spiritual life. The opposite of Viveka or discrimination is Avidya or ignorance. Patanjali defines Avidya thus:

Anitya-ashuchi-duhkha-anatmasu nitya-shuchi-sukha-Atma-khyatih avidya (Patanjali Yoga Sutras, 56) Ignorance is mistaking the ephemeral as the Eternal, the impure as pure, the painful as pleasurable, and the non-self as the Self. Discrimination and sincere spiritual practice are the only antidotes to ignorance. Thus when discrimination is practised it dispels ignorance, brings right understanding, sets before us the right goal, strengthens our resolve, helps us discard what is harmful, helps us overcome all obstacles, and gradually leads us to God-realisation, and Blessedness.

M. (humbly): "How ought we to live in the world?" Master: "Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all -- with wife and children, father and mother -- and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you. "A maidservant in the house of a rich man performs all the household duties, but her thoughts are fixed on her own home in her native village. She brings up her master's children as if they were her own. She even speaks of them as 'My Rama' or 'My Hari'. But in her own mind she knows very well that they do not belong to her at all. "The tortoise moves about in the water. But can you guess where her thoughts are? There on the bank, where her eggs are lying. Do all your duties in the world, but keep your mind on God. "If you enter the world without first cultivating love for God, you will be entangled more and more. You will be overwhelmed with its danger, its grief, its sorrows. And the more you think of worldly things, the more you will be attached to them." This was the fifth commandment of Sri Ramakrishna. In our last article the practice of discrimination was discussed. The natural corollary of discrimination is detachment; discrimination without detachment is useless. Every spiritual aspirant, ultimately, learns that he has to live in this world with detachment; it is the very corner-stone of spiritual progress. This teaching of Sri Ramakrishna contains three important points:

1. One must perform one's duties diligently, with reverence and love.
2. One must never forget that no-one in this world belongs to him except God.
3. Without acquiring love for God and some amount of detachment it is impossible not to be overwhelmed by attachments and cares.

(1) Most of the spiritual aspirants in this world are householders having many duties, responsibilities and the inevitable worries. If one does not know how to detach the mind, at least to some extent it is impossible to focus the mind on God. Sri Ramakrishna gives such devotees clear and definite guidance. One must discharge one's duties with great love and care. No one can attain the state of inaction except

by going through the field of action. For most people it is not possible to sit quiet. The field of action strengthens one's character. Right attitude, concentration, tranquillity and devotion - with these every action is transformed into spiritual practice. Sri Ramakrishna's advice to serve one's parents etc., with great love and reverence 'as if they were very dear to you' is not make believe. He is merely cautioning us not to fall into the trap of attachment. Many devotees think that they are serving their parents, family etc with detachment. This is pure self-deception. When things are going on well they think they are progressing spiritually. But let there be slight trouble - immediately they are overwhelmed. The test of detachment can be found in tranquillity of mind. True devotees, under difficult situations, not only remain tranquil but depend all the more on God. That is why Sri Ramakrishna's advice is so very important. This was the advice given in the Gita by Sri Krishna to Arjuna. Every religion emphasizes the practice of detachment. At the same time detachment must not make us cold, callous and insensitive to others' pain and feeling. Says Swami Vivekananda: 'There are men who are never attracted by anything. They can never love, they are hard-hearted and apathetic; they escape most of the miseries of life. But the wall never feels misery, the wall never loves, is never hurt; but it is the wall, after all. Surely it is better to be attached and caught than to be a wall. We do not want that. That is weakness, that is death.' Spiritual aspirants also must be careful not to over-do their duties. In the name of obligations and duties it is possible to go beyond all reason, to fall into the net of maya. Often maya masquerades in the form of daya. Sri Ramakrishna used to call impure love maya, and pure love daya. According to him: 'There is a great deal of difference between daya, compassion, and maya, attachment. daya is good, but not maya, maya is love for one's relatives-one's wife, children, brother, sister, nephew, father and mother. But daya is the same love for all created beings without any distinction. Again, 'Maya' entangles man and turns him away from God. But through daya one realizes God.' Devotees are required to develop daya but not maya. So one should have a clear idea of one's obligations and duties, and how to perform them. A question by the author of 'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna' makes this clear. Disciple: How long, Sir, have I obligations to the family? The Master: "So long as the family is not provided with enough to maintain itself. But if your children can support themselves, you have no more duty to them." To some householder devotees the Master said : "You will look upon money only as a means of getting food, clothes and shelter, of worshipping the Deity and serving Sadhus and devotees. But it is wrong to hoard it. Bees labour hard to build their hives, but man comes and robs them. You need not renounce 'lust' completely. But after a few children are born, you and your wife should live like brother and sister."

(2) No one really belongs to any one in this world. A Sanskrit poem says: 'Just as twigs being carried by the current in a river come nearer and again get separated so also people come nearer and get separated according to the results of their past actions.' This is absolutely true. If we look back into our past we can realize how true this statement is. The One and only Eternal Companion of our life is God alone. We learn this truth only after much suffering. Every being in this world is journeying

towards God, the final destination of all. The journey comes to an end only when we reach Him. Therefore all the unions and separations in this world are only accidental and meant only to help us develop detachment and devotion. Until we learn our lessons we will be presented with the same situations and difficulties. Hence Sri Ramakrishna's advice that we should never forget that no-one belongs to us except God. "Always consider that your family concerns are not yours; they are God's and you are His servant come here to obey His commands. When this Idea becomes firm, there remains nothing indeed that a man may call his own."

(3)It is not easy to believe that only God belongs to us unless one acquires some amount of devotion to Him. This is possible only through constant unremitting practice for a long time. With faith in one's Guru and in the teachings of scriptures one should carry on with regular practice of japa, prayer and service. In course of time the mind gets purified and the seed of devotion grows slowly. If one has devotion to God then there is nothing to fear or worry about. Devotion itself takes possession and unerringly guides the devotee in all matters. Even under trying circumstances devotees keep their balance. In fact the more the troubles the more would be their longing and reliance on Him. The more they experience pain the more they feel the insubstantiality of this world. Difficulties increase their detachment further. Thus slowly but surely they progress until they reach Him and become Blessed. We have discussed the five commandments of Sri Ramakrishna in considerable detail. Undoubtedly any one who sincerely tries to put into practice these five commandments will make spiritual progress and will realize God. "Hear, ye children of immortal bliss! Even ye that reside in higher spheres! I have found the Ancient One who is beyond all darkness, all delusion; knowing Him alone you shall be saved from death over again."