

## SWAMI BRAHMANANDA - THE SPIRITUAL SON OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

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### I

Every enterprise requires two distinctive forces to keep it in a palpable, healthy and dynamic condition — one to help it expand and the other to aid it in consolidation. Both these forces are imperative. For without depth expansion tends towards infirmity, and without expansion depth becomes meaningless. This is more poignantly felt in the case of an enterprise which seeks to serve the spiritual needs of mankind as a whole. That is what happened to Hinduism, the Eternal Religion, when it made foreign travel a taboo. The exchange of ideas ceased; the firmament of religion shrank, as it were, to such small dimensions that it was thought to be contained in the mere observance of certain external practices.

In the movement ushered in by Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda played the dynamic part of spreading the message of the Master broadcast. He trotted the earth almost from end to end in order to do this. But the life given to him was very short, a bare 39 years, out of which his actual work can be said to begin only after 1886. If we remember the days of the Baranagore monastery we find Swami Vivekananda not as the dynamic interlocutor but as the consolidator. For after the passing away of the Master the young disciples had gone back to their homes and it was left to Swami Vivekananda to gather them back, instil the Master's fiery renunciation into them and pick up the thread from where the Master had left to ensconce the brotherhood on a firm footing. And once it was done, the Master called him, as it were, to function as the other arm, that of taking the message of the Eternal Religion to different parts of the world. For a time it appears, on the surface, that Swami Vivekananda had ceased to consolidate but even this appearance is for a brief span of time. Even from America he was urging his *gurubhais* and disciples to get a plot of land and to build a monastery, from where future preachers of Vedanta could spring up.

But his life, as we have said, was too brief and he had so much to do in making the world know about the Master's message. He, therefore, stuck to it and submitted to the commands from on High. Nevertheless he saw his approaching end. To whom should he entrust the Master's treasure — the sacred task of guiding the movement? The Master himself had solved this problem for Narendranath in the Dakshineswar days. Once Sri Ramakrishna had remarked, `Rakhal has in him the capacity to rule a

kingdom.' Narendranath who was present on the occasion took the hint. He told the younger group of the Master's disciples about the Master's appreciation and said, 'From today we shall call Rakhal, Raja', and that epithet stuck on. Sri Ramakrishna who heard about it later, was greatly pleased. Remembering the Master's words Swamiji from the very beginning left him in charge of the Math and formally made over to Rakhal, Swami Brahmananda, the Presidentship of the organization in 1901. For full twenty-one years he guided the faltering foot-steps of the young organization un-ostentatiously, yet commanding the respect, awe and love of one and all with whomsoever he came in contact.

After the going forth of the message of Sri Ramakrishna into the world, it was required that preachers fit to take up the mantle were to be recruited and trained, not for a few years but for generations to come. It was a work which required infinite patience. It was the task of consolidation of what was already gained. And this task devolved on the shoulders of Swami Brahmananda, and before two years had elapsed he lost his companion, Swami Vivekananda.

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It is difficult to assess the personality of the spiritually great ones. It is more so when the person happens to be of a silent disposition. So, to get a peep into the personality of Swami Brahmananda we have to take recourse to Sri Ramakrishna. The Master has left to us, through his talks, his insight into the exalted characteristics of his disciples, their inherent natures and their unapproachable heights of renunciation. 'Once, before Rakhal came,' says Sri Ramakrishna, 'I saw in a vision that the Divine Mother suddenly brought a boy, and placing him on my lap said, "He is your son". I was startled to hear it. I said, "What is that? How can I have a son?" -She smiled and explained, "He is not a son in the ordinary worldly sense of the term, but your all-renouncing spiritual son." Thus assured, I was consoled. Rakhal came sometime after I had that vision and I recognized him at once as the boy.' Another time Sri Ramakrishna stated how Rakhal's nature was revealed to him: 'One day just before Rakhal came here I saw in a trance Krishna, as the shepherd boy of Vrindavana, standing on a full-blown lotus in the midst of a lake and by his side stood a boy looking at Him playfully. When Rakhal came, I knew him as that boy, as Krishna's companion.' Rakhal was therefore not only the companion of the Master in this Incarnation but in the past as well. The Incarnations come with such pure souls to help them in their divine mission.

Again, Sri Ramakrishna used to class him as an *Īswarakoti* — one possessed of divine qualities, perfect from his very birth—and also as one of the inner circle (*antaranga*). '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.... Their one thought is how to realize God,' said the Master many a time. These words of the Master are very significant. For Sri Ramakrishna did not heap any undue praise on anyone for whatsoever a reason. He was simple as a child and whatever was revealed to his insight he spoke without reservation. Moreover, he depended on the Divine Mother for everything, even to bring to him versatile spiritual geniuses, which the Mother had said would come to him. He prayed to Her and cried in anguish at the delay in their coming but there he rested. All his appeals were to the Divine Mother and he was sure that She would not fail him. She did not let him down at any time. That is the reason why his estimation is infallible, his every word in-estimable.

Now, the relation between Sri Ramakrishna and Rakhal was sweet, intimate and very touching. His attitude towards this disciple was like that of a mother to her child. Rakhal too in his presence was just like a child of five or six, wholly dependent on him and basking as it were, under his protecting wings.

Such had been the personality of Swami Brahmananda even at the beginning of his spiritual career. It deepened and expanded with the passage of time. For the first few years after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna he spent his time exclusively in tapasya at Puri, Banaras, Vrindavan, and on the banks of the Narmada. Knowing his in-drawn nature and complete reticence to pay heed to the wants of the body Swamiji enjoined one of his brother disciples to accompany him and look after his needs. Swami Subodhananda, another direct disciple of the Master, who lived with him at Vrindavan used to bring him food and set it down in an appointed place, but many days it would remain untouched, for Maharaj, as Rakhal was lovingly called, would be lost to the outer world, in the contemplation of the divine.

At Banaras when he was offered help in the way of arrangement for his food as long as he stayed there, he politely but firmly declined the offer and preferred to live on the food begged from the alms-houses. For it entailed no obligation on him. Besides, it left him free from disturbance by way of people crowding in. This was the time when he desired to be left alone. From Banaras he proceeded to the banks of the Narmada. It is said that here, once, for six days at a stretch he had no consciousness of the outer world at all. So deep was his samadhi. But what divine experiences and visions he had during these times were never known. They remained a sealed book for ever as he never talked about them. Once, however, he remarked, 'The religious life begins after Nirvikalpa samadhi '. But how few can understand it! Till one attains that state one sees everything in a different way, one's evaluation of things gets coloured by one's own nature. The ideal is very high and hence appears impossible. But persons like him who have attained the goal have affirmed it. Swamiji too said, 'Religion is realization '. Until then we are all groping in the dark.

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Swami Brahmananda's contribution to the world is enormous but the brightest part of it is his life — austere undertaken, unostentatiously but immaculately lived and above all purely dependent upon God. It is an absorbing study to follow his footsteps as a pilgrim from Banaras to Narmada, from thence to Panchavati, Dwaraka, and other places. His absolute dependence on God and stern abidance by the rule of non-acceptance of money is a thing that fills one with awe and more so in a world where everything seems to go topsy turvy in the absence of that one thing — money. His dependence on God was pure and simple, almost child-like. At Bombay a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna pressed him to accept his hospitality but he refused on the ground that it would interfere with his solitude and flag away his dependence on God. He put up in a quiet place near Mumbadevi's temple and lived on alms. Even for travel he would not accept money. Many places he covered on foot despite the untold difficulties.

During this time, in Vrindavan, he came across Vijay Krishna Goswami whom he knew at Dakshineswar. Both were glad at the meeting. The Goswamiji, who had come to know of the austere life being led by Swami Brahmananda, asked him: 'Sir, why are you engaged in such austere practices when Sri Ramakrishna had already bestowed on you all types of experiences and visions?' In a sweet voice, the Swami replied, 'What I have experienced by his grace I am trying to make my own.' The Goswami was wonderstruck. He felt the surge of the God-hunger that was passing through the Swami and thought it futile to try to dissuade him from his pursuit. From Vrindavan he went to Hardwar to continue his life of contemplation. Thus it was a saga of intense sadhana for a long period until, perhaps, he received some command from Sri Ramakrishna to return to the field of work. For just when he was passing his days blissfully at Vrindavan he suddenly left for Calcutta. After a few days of his arrival there he said to some of his brother disciples: 'I was blissful at Vrindavan. But I came here so that I may be of service to the brothers at the Math to help them express in their lives that love and devotion which we found in Sri Ramakrishna, so that people who would come in contact with them may be reminded of him.' Further he added, 'People will come to you, will come to the Math seeking solace. They will take shelter at Sri Ramakrishna's feet and attain peace from the miseries of this world.'

It must be remembered, however, that we cannot expect always something spectacular to happen in the life of a man of the spirit. The contribution of these spiritual ones go, more often than not, unnoticed. For their influence like the morning dew that brings into blossom myriads of flowers is silently but unobtrusively exerted. It cannot be measured in terms of worldly things. A single moment's contact with them, a single word of theirs changes some men, gives others supreme consolation. It is

unwise, therefore, to judge these great ones from mere outward accomplishments. People competent to know about them are those who have attained similar spiritual heights. In this connection it would be profitable to know what Swamiji once said of him: 'Raja is the greatest treasure house of spirituality.' On another occasion when a European devotee came to Swamiji with his spiritual problems Swamiji sent him to Swami Brahmananda with the words: 'There is a dynamo working and we are all under him.' The devotee after conversing with Swami Brahmananda felt his doubts cleared and expressed gratitude for the help. Such was his personality.

The tree is known by its fruits. But seldom is it known how the seed grew from its tiny, inconspicuous beginning into the tree. The Ramakrishna Order has today expanded into a fairly big institution and has immense possibilities of further growth in it. But it was Maharaj who sowed the seed, watered and manured it with all motherly care in order that it may shoot up into a mighty banyan tree, so that the message of Sri Ramakrishna could reach and minister to the spiritual as also the secular needs of humanity for ever. Maharaj, it is needless to say, firmly believed like Swamiji that humanity needed the message of Sri Ramakrishna particularly at the present moment of its evolution. So in order to put the organization on a firm footing, Maharaj, who was far-sighted in administration, picked and chose the right type of human instruments, monks and lay devotees, for particular fields of work both in India and abroad. That is why the success the disciples, lay or monastic, achieved everywhere was almost phenomenal.

#### **IV**

From the time Swami Brahmananda, who came to be known to the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna as 'Maharaj', arrived at Calcutta, after his long pilgrimage, a different phase opened in his life — that of ministering to the spiritual needs of the people. Sri Ramakrishna's name had by then spread far and wide and many earnest seekers, young and old, now thirsted to drink of the ambrosia of his message. But Sri Ramakrishna was not living in his physical tenement any longer. People had also heard a great deal about Maharaj; how he was the beloved of the Master and so on; so they, from all walks of life, young and old, students and the employed came to him whenever he stayed in Calcutta. The ease with which he moved with them made them shed the awe, that otherwise naturally awakened in them on seeing him, and find in him a person almost of their own age. They felt free to unburden their innermost thoughts and problems to him as if he was their life long confidant. And he with his command over the spiritual kingdom ministered to their needs.

But it was not always that he talked about spiritual matters. With many he discussed things in which they were interested. We can only

presume, now at this distance of time, that probably that was the way by which he drew them toward himself and through that process got them interested in the life spiritual. For who can hold long their own once they come in touch with the divine? His close and long association with and training under his Master had revealed to him the intricacies of human nature, and this knowledge he utilized in imparting instructions suited to each individual. Many young men soon began to come and it was left to him to train them and cast them in the mould of Sri Ramakrishna. This spiritual ministry thus begun continued throughout the rest of his life.

## V

After the passing away of Swami Vivekananda the full responsibility of guiding the mission fell upon him. We have said that he used to remain indrawn most of the time, but it was also true that he was aware of what went on throughout the organization. Though in the beginning there were a few centres, gradually the work of the Order expanded. More centres sprang up but his vigilant eye was on every activity of the mission, without any one being aware of it. He never interfered with the normal working of any centre but everyone looked to him for his blessings on any new venture. He even knew the progress each one of the members of the order made and we have this on the authority of his own words: 'Do you think,' said he to a disciple, 'I don't know what you boys have been doing and how you have been faring in the path of God. I may live in one place and seem to be unconcerned, but I know what is happening to each of you.'

Many a time his mere presence would solve the knottiest of problems that arose in a centre and that without his having the necessity to enquire into them. For in his presence the minds of the aspirants were lifted far above the mundane plane and the petty squabbles that they might have indulged in appeared to them as childish and unbecoming of them. Thus before him all problems melted like snow before the sun.

'Once when he was asked,' writes a disciple, '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 to add any new ones. Add more love, attain more devotion and help others to move toward the ideal of God."' That was his prescription. For had he not seen how Sri Ramakrishna without formally inaugurating any organization knitted them, young boys, indissolubly together? That bond was more firm than all the rules could induce to hold together. He saw that love destroyed hatred and jealousies. Devotion lifted man from the animal-level to the godly state, and naturally in that state men could do with few rules. If one could really be devoted to God how could he hate His creatures?

And how to add this love? Unless one loved God intensely one cannot truly love His creatures. All other love is either a trading as Swamiji put it —you do me something and in return I cherish you some

affection — or a make-believe. And loving God is not an easy matter. Unless one sees God one cannot love Him truly and wholly. So Maharaj laid great stress on practice of the spiritual disciplines to attain God-realization, to see God.

‘Onward, forward’ was his watchword to one and all. Practice of spiritual disciplines was his remedy for all types of drawbacks, moral as well as spiritual. For he said that this would clear one's perspective, purify one's mind and make one see light where one saw darkness before. Spiritual disciplines properly practised made one humble.

Someone once asked, ‘Maharaj, I am not getting concentration of mind. I do not feel that I am making any progress spiritually.’ He replied: ‘Practise spiritual disciplines regularly for eight or nine years and then you will reap the fruits of your efforts. Even in a year you will make some progress.’ Thus with assurances and encouragements he guided the disciples on the path of the Spirit. But when in spite of his efforts if a disciple failed to make progress, Maharaj helped him to clear the hurdles. Yet he laid great stress on individual effort.

One thing he warned against was about indulging in idle talk. He said, ‘Idle talk wastes much energy.’ A spiritual aspirant is to be up and doing. His thoughts should be constantly dwelling on God. The Upanisads say, ‘Know Him alone, give up all vain talk.’<sup>1</sup> For, once the mind is allowed to run where it pleases it will be difficult to gather it again. In the Kathopanishad there is a beautiful allegory where the Self is likened to the owner, body to the chariot, the discriminating intellect to the charioteer, the mind to the reins, the senses to the horses and the sense objects to the roads.<sup>2</sup> Then it goes on to say, ‘One whose intellect is dull and undiscriminating and one who is always of uncontrolled mind, his senses are uncontrolled like the wicked horses of a charioteer.’<sup>3</sup> They bring the chariot and the owner to grief. Maharaj says, Give your mind to the world and it will destroy not only your mind and soul but the body too. On the other hand give it to God and it will contribute not only to the well-being of the mind but of the body also.’ Sri Ramakrishna too warns us: ‘The mind is like a packet of mustard seeds — once spilled it is very difficult to collect them again.’ Hence we must always be circumspect of what we think, of what we talk and what we do.

Swami Brahmananda was a tower of strength to the organization. Under his fostering care it was nurtured during its early days almost from its inception. So when we shall be celebrating his hundred and second birthday—he was only a few days younger to Swamiji—this month it is but meet we look back and think over this divine personality who came into the world to transmit the message of the Incarnation of the age, Sri Ramakrishna, and imbibe some inspiration to carry us onward on the path of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Mundaka Up. 2.2.5.

<sup>2</sup> Kathopanishad III. 3 and 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 5.