

SWAMI RAMAKRISHNANANDA (*)

By Swami Paratparananda

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This world is a conglomeration of good and evil, the magnanimous and the diabolic. In each one of us these elements are present in a lesser or more degree. Man's effort is to eliminate the diabolic, the degrading and weakening elements by cultivating the opposite virtues: magnanimity, tolerance, sympathy, love, strength and the like. He has to manifest these divine qualities in full and then only does he reach his pristine perfection. And to reach this perfection, is the goal of all life. 'Everything that exists is moving towards the manifestation of that perfection whether it is conscious of that or not,' says Swami Vivekananda. It is one thing to move unknowingly or drift along the current and quite another to consciously seek to reach perfection. The former may take aeons before the goal is reached whereas the latter may find it in this very life. All Scriptures are but directions to reach this perfection, this freedom. But Scriptures alone by themselves do not help man attain this perfection unless aided and supported by individual effort. The Hindu Scriptures are bold and unequivocally explicit on this point. They declare: 'This Atman is not to be attained by ratiocinations, not by intellect, nay not even by the knowledge of an infinite number of Srutis (Scriptures).'¹ They do not mince matters.

Scriptures lay down only principles and precepts which we have to follow to attain that perfection. Man understands these principles when he has examples before him. Majority of us are not so constituted as to understand the abstract principles without the help of illustrations. 'Would to God that all of us were so developed that we would not require any example, would not require any persons. But that we are not,' says Swami Vivekananda. So we need examples to explain the abstract principles enunciated in the Shastras. The lives of sages and saints supply this want. Hence arises the necessity to study these lives, that we can learn the ways and means to shed our encrustations and *upadhis*-beginning from the ego to the body — that bind us down to the world.

We have heard it said that he who has obtained the grace of a preceptor alone can know Brahman. He alone can realize God. We have also heard it said that one should approach such a Guru with humility, and learn of him by obeisance, by questioning and by service.² But in an age when valuation of things higher seems to have undergone a great change and when scepticism stalks the earth, these things are rarely believed, unless there are dazzling examples which can pierce through the veils and reach the heart of man.

Our land has been fortunate to bear on its bosom personages of such spiritual magnitude, as the occasions demanded, as could scatter the gathering clouds of agnosticism and unbelief by blasts of their wonderful

realizations. So we find Sri Ramakrishna come to re-establish the eternal spiritual values at a time when religion was considered as mere superstition. He gathered round him the very lads who were most sceptic, but sincere, from the city of Calcutta to propagate his message, transformed them and commanded them to be like lamps unto the weary travellers on this parched earth. Some he commanded with vehemence to go forth and bring the erring humanity to its senses and gather into the fold the sheep that have strayed away.

Among these University students was Sashi Bhusan Chakravarti, young, strong, energetic, with a brilliant intellect. In spite of all these qualities or because of them there was an undercurrent of unrest in him, which goaded him on to seek spiritual solace first in the Brahmo Samaj and later at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna. That he was a sceptic at the time he met Sri Ramakrishna is amply borne out by his reply to the Master's question, whether he believed in God with form or in a formless God. He had replied, 'When I am not certain of the very existence of God how can I say one way or the other.' This feeling however did not last long. His first contact with the Master revealed to him, as it were, quite different regions, where everything was soothing to the senses and bestowing serenity on the mind. He hungered for it more and more. His visits to the Master became frequent. Many a day he would come to Sri Ramakrishna full of doubts but the Master solved them all without it being necessary for him to ask about them. Then developed an intimacy, a relationship which bound Sashi forever with the Master. Sashi began to regard Sri Ramakrishna's words as divine injunctions and faithfully followed them to the letter. It is said that once coming to know of the excellence of Sufi Poetry he started studying Persian. He took to its study so seriously that even when he went to Dakshineswar he used to carry those books with him. One day he was so absorbed in their study that he did not hear Sri Ramakrishna call until the Master had called him thrice. When, however, the Master observed, 'If you forget your duties for the sake of secular studies, you will lose your devotion,' he made a bundle of those books and threw them into the Ganges. Books lost all importance for him from then onwards.

After Sashi's two years of communion in the bliss that flowed incessantly at Dakshineswar, came the unforeseen blow in the form of the Master's fatal illness. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that this illness of his was the Divine Mother's device for separating the inner circle of devotees from the rest. Among those who served the Master at this time with untiring zeal, Sashi stood first. For Sashi, the Master was his all in all. He could not brook the idea that the Master would leave his mortal coil so soon. But all indications were against this presumption. Yet night and day he remained like a shadow at the Master's bedside and nursed him. Personal service to the Guru formed his main spiritual practice at this time and this remained the dominant note of his life throughout the rest of his days. To serve the Master whole-heartedly became a passion with

him. The chroniclers of Sri Ramakrishna referring to Sashi's service, write: 'He practised no other spiritual discipline. He knew no other asceticism. Regardless of personal comfort, of food or rest, he was indefatigably at work. His one idea was to alleviate the sufferings of the Master. He would have given up his life if he had thought that would cure him. He had attained perfection through service; so of what use were other forms of disciplines for him? Everyone marvelled at his indefatigable energy, his sustained power of endurance and his boundless love for the Master.'

For eight months or more Sashi knew no rest or comfort in serving the Master. But setting at naught all hopes and wishes of the devotees, the best medical advice, treatment, and nursing, the day of final departure of the Master arrived. Sri Ramakrishna was more cheerful that day than ever and the devotees believed that he was really getting better, so that, when the end actually came Sashi could not believe it. He remonstrated with the Doctor for declaring that life was extinct. He thought it was just another samadhi of the Master and requested the assembled devotees to chant the Lord's name. They chanted Lord Hari's name for a long time. But when at last, life did not return and the body grew cold they carried it to the burning ghat. The anguish Sashi felt at the departure of his beloved Master can only be imagined than described. He fell at the feet of the Master unconscious. However, after reviving he sang the name of the Master in triumphant praise. When the cremation was over he gathered the relics that remained and carried them on his head to the Cossipore garden.

Sashi's service to the Master did not stop with the disappearance of the Master's corporeal frame. We find him engaged in the Master's service again at the Baranagore Math, whither they had moved after the expiry of the lease of the Cossipore Garden. Here Sashi Maharaj set apart a separate room for the preservation of the Master's relics. Placing a portrait of the Master on a pedestal in that room he commenced worshipping the Master in the orthodox way. His devotion and worship thoroughly moved and left a deep impression on the visitors.

Towards the end of December 1886 the young disciples who had renounced the world, formally took the vow of sannyasa and assumed new names. Narendra, into whose care the Master had left the disciples, wanted to have the name 'Swami Ramakrishnananda' for himself. But having seen the unbounded love Sashi bore towards the Master and the inimitable way in which he served him, Narendra relinquished the covetable name in favour of the brother disciple. And true to his name Sashi Maharaj found bliss in the service of the Master and the dissemination of his message till the end of his life to the exclusion of all his personal needs.

The early days in the monastery were of extreme privation. The contributions which some of the lay disciples of the Master made were inadequate for the expenses of the brotherhood. Sometimes they would

go by turns and beg, but the food thus secured was not even sufficient for the day. Swami Ramakrishnananda at that time worked as a teacher for three months in a nearby High School to maintain the monastery and the service of the Master. When others lost themselves in meditation it was Swami Ramakrishnananda who after offering the food to Sri Ramakrishna would wait with their meals or even drag them out of their meditation. Thus he kept watch on the relics of the Master and looked after the children of the Master like a mother.

He believed that the Master was present in the shrine and therefore never felt the necessity to go on pilgrimages. The sanctity of all the places of pilgrimage was experienced by him in the shrine. When all the other brother disciples in response to the call of the itinerant life left the monastery one by one Swami Ramakrishnananda stuck to his post of watching over the sacred relics of the Master. He never even went to Calcutta to see Suresh Mitra, a devotee of the Master, who was on his death-bed. But at the earnest insistence of the latter he went in a carriage hired for the return journey, spent an hour with the devotee and returned to the monastery.

To Swami Ramakrishnananda the likeness of the Master ceased to be a likeness. He treated the portrait as if it was the Master himself in flesh and blood. On a sultry night at the Alambazar monastery — to which place the monastery was shifted from Baranagore — when he was fanning himself he suddenly got up and as he felt that the Master should also be feeling the burning heat, entered the shrine and standing near the cot of the Master fanned him till dawn. Such incidents were not infrequent in his life.

After 11 years of constant watch over the Master's relics, he was called upon, by Swami Vivekananda, to go to Madras and found a monastery there in the name of the Master and spread his message. Swami Ramakrishnananda readily agreed to the leader's call recognising behind it the guiding hand of the Master; for did not Sri Ramakrishna entrust the responsibility of all of them to Swami Vivekananda? Did not the Master make him their leader? He took the next steamer to Madras and arrived there at the end of March 1897 with a framed photo of Sri Ramakrishna.

As at Baranagore and Alambazar here too in Madras he established a shrine and performed daily worship of the Master. All the activities of the Math centred round Sri Ramakrishna. But here too it was a continuation of those days of travail. The stir and enthusiasm that was created by Swami Vivekananda's triumphant tour in the West had died down with the receptions given to him in Madras and other places. When therefore Swami Ramakrishnananda started a monastery first on the Ice House Road and later at the Ice House and subsequently at Mylapore he had to be sometimes the poojari, cook, servant and all, on account of paucity of funds. He had to take classes in different parts of the City. At times when he returned in the evening he would be too tired to cook. On

such occasions he would satisfy his hunger by a piece of bread. Yet except a few of his students, who knew about his difficulties and volunteered to remove them, none cared to know. He was very reticent to receive the help proffered by those young men lest it should cause them inconvenience. For their own condition was far from affluent.

These privations, however, stood not in his way of maintaining the worship of the Master in all its detail. Such were the difficult days that he passed through, that sometimes there would be nothing to offer to the Master and the Swami in great distress would go to the shrine and pour out his anguish. One day when the Swami was in the Shrine some visitors arrived and they heard the Swami call out in loud and angry tones, 'You have brought me here, Old Man, and left me helpless! Are you testing my powers of patience and endurance? I will not go and beg hereafter for my sake or even for yours. If anything comes unasked I will offer it to you and share the *prasadam*. If not, I will bring the sea-sand for offering to you and I shall live upon that.'

As in the Alambazar Monastery in Madras too he would on sultry days fan the Master's portrait for hours on end both in the afternoons and nights. As days passed his conviction that the Master was himself present in his likeness grew stronger and stronger. His worship therefore attained the classic character of service to a beloved person. Whenever he himself felt the oppressive heat he would immediately remember about the Master, open the shrine and would start fanning him. Besides, as Sister Devamata has stated 'He was dead to himself and alive only in the Master.' Writing about the Swami she further adds: 'His coming and going, his eating and sleeping, his labour and teaching, his entire living took their rise in the will of the Master, never in his own desire and convenience.

Those who saw him carry his Master's picture close to his heart, his body bent over it in protection as he walked in rain from the carriage to the entrance to the new Math hall at Mylapore (Madras), when he moved the shrine there from the Ice House, could appreciate the tenderness of love, the power of devotion for his Guru which transfused his being. He could say of his Master as truly as St. Paul said of his: "The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith in the Son of God."

An incident that happened at the Mylapore Math is reminiscent of this faith of the Swami. The first building of the Math at Mylapore had developed cracks in several places and during rains water would come down through these fissures. Swami Ramakrishnananda at such times would enter the shrine to see whether water leaked through the roof. One night he found that water dripped just over the likeness of the Master. He stood there holding an umbrella over the Master till the night wore out and the rains stopped. He did not move the portrait of the Master to a safer side as that would mean disturbing the Master's sleep at an unusual hour.

Swami Ramakrishnananda's life was one of great austerity and self-

surrender. His complete dependence on the Master was observed on more than one occasion. On the death of Mr. Biligiri Iyengar the original owner, the Ice House, in which the Math was housed, came up for auction. The devotees apprehensive of the outcome if the house passed into a stranger's hands were sorely perturbed and one of them reported the progress of the auction to the Swami every now and then. But the Swami, who was seated at some distance from the crowd that had gathered, remained calm and serene and after a time remarked to the devotee: 'My wants are few, what do we care who buys or sells? I need only a small room for Sri Guru Maharaj. I can stay anywhere and spend my time in speaking about him.'

Another time Swami Ramakrishnananda had been to Puri to escort Swami Brahmananda to Madras. Through some misunderstanding no berth was reserved for him in the train. After much difficulty an upper berth was made available. For a person of the Swami's build to occupy a weakly built upper berth meant no small danger to the occupants below. This, therefore, brought forth some caustic comments from the passengers. One of the friends who had come to see the Swami off expressed his embarrassment at the situation. The Swami's smiling and calm reply to him was, 'Do not mind. The Divine Mother will take care of me.' And strange to say the train had to be abandoned as the engine had derailed; a separate train left for Madras from another track and in it the Swami was provided with a single first class compartment by the station master. As the Swami boarded the train he said to Devamata with the same confident smile, 'I told you, sister, that the Divine Mother would look after me.'

On another occasion wide publicity was given that on the next day, the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, there would be a grand feeding of the poor but there was not a single bag of rice in the Math. When some devotee asked the Swami how he was going to feed the poor, his quiet rebuke in a compassionate tone was: 'You are a fool. Have you no faith in Annapurna Devi? She will take care of Her children. Throw the whole burden on Her and be free from all anxieties.' As they were talking thus, carts laden with rice and provisions in sufficient supply rolled into the Math compound. The statement of Sri Krishna in the Gita, 'I take upon Myself the welfare of those who have completely surrendered themselves to Me,' was thus seen here verified in toto.

His was a life of tremendous activity. He sometimes took as many as eleven classes a week in Madras. He went on invitation to lecture to many places in South India, Bombay and even far off Burma. Though he was in the midst of such intense activity he remained unattached, and alone though surrounded by men. Like the deep waters of the ocean his inner being remained unmoved by the ripples of activities and disturbances on the surface. Once he was heard to remark, 'I am full of God. What need have I of any one else?' He analysed, 'Aloneness means singleness, purity. In reality fearlessness exists where there is only one.'

Since we cannot be happy as long as we fear, we shall not find peace until we can say I am alone, I need nothing.'

The Bhagavad Gita and *Vishnusahasranama* were very dear to his heart. Every morning before he would begin his work he would chant them without fail. His observations on the efficacy of the chanting of the Gita demand special attention in this age when the sceptic moderns and cynics deprecate and doubt the value of such chanting — when done without understanding its meaning. He said, 'Let urgent business remain or not, I have learnt that the reading of the Gita is the most meritorious and glorious of all actions. How can he who has enjoyed and understood for a time at least the cardinal truths of the Gita be attracted by the paltry things of the world? Really to enjoy the sweetness of the Gita one should possess the force of Bhakti and the unstinted devotion of a pure heart. Nevertheless even the mere repetition of the Holy words that fell from the lips of Bhagavan Sri Krishna cannot be without efficacy. It will surely arouse in the reader an unfailing sense of purity and devotion.' Will the worldly-wise take this advice and give it a fair trial before condemning such practices?

Living with a God-man Swami Ramakrishnananda had learnt to respect the prophets of all religions and sects. He considered it blasphemy to speak ill of them. He could not even tolerate any one speaking disparagingly of them within his hearing. His reprimands on such occasions were severe irrespective of the person to whom they were meant. Once he left a place where he was invited to discuss religious topics, because someone spoke irreverently of Sri Sankara, saying that he had no place where the Acharya was not respected. A rich devotee another day spoke slightly of Sankara in his presence. The Swami came down upon him with a homethrust which silenced the speaker. The assembled devotees later expressed their fear that the gentleman might stop his contribution to the Math. But the Swami did not care about it. The gentleman on the other hand understood his fault and corrected himself. Another time it was a youth who happened to pass uncharitable remarks about the *Chaitanya Charitarmrita*, that fell into his wrath. Thus by precept and example he has taught that every religious teacher is great and deserves all our homage and reverence.

His was a life of self-abandonment. To him selfishness meant debasing, demoralising, and degrading oneself. To him assertion of the ego meant atrociousness. He said: 'When God asserts himself in man he becomes good, pure and virtuous. Try to feel God inside yourself and you will overcome all selfishness. All your anxieties and worries come from selfishness. Let go your little self and they will disappear.' Further he added, 'So long as we are selfish, our work is bound to be fruitless. We may deliver fine lectures, we may gain name and fame but the actual results will be nil.' He asked, 'How can we be unfeeling? If we cannot love others, if we cannot serve others, what are we here for? 'And out of this expansive heart arose the conception of the Students' Home when he met

some boys orphaned by the epidemic of plague at Coimbatore. The Swami took them under his care and thus was formed the nucleus of the Students' Home of Madras which today is providing succour to hundreds of poor boys yearly.

He was the pioneer of the Ramakrishna Movement first in Calcutta and later in the South. It was he who held the fort, as it were, when all others went away for tapasya or on pilgrimage. It was he who managed the affairs of the monastery for the first eleven years during its most crucial days. Beset though he was with the problems usually encountered by a pioneer of a new movement he faced them all bravely and solved them. And for all this his only asset was his devotion to the Master and calm resignation to his will. To quote Swami Premananda, one of the direct disciples of the Master: 'In fact, Swami Ramakrishnananda, and none of us, is the founder of the Math and its shrine. He stuck to the shrine in spite of the protests of his brother disciples.' And this worship has now been helping myriads of people to strengthen their faith in external worship and grow in spirituality both in this country as well as outside it.

He travelled widely lecturing and spreading the message of Vedanta as lived by the Master all over the South, and this message was well received, particularly in Bangalore, Mysore and Travancore. A monastery was established in Bangalore on a firm basis before long by his untiring efforts. But it is not meet to judge the achievements of the great ones by the immediate results, for the seeds they sow never prove barren but abide their time and when suitable atmosphere and environment are created they germinate and yield plentiful results. The country today is reaping a rich harvest the seeds of which were sown by him in the first decade of this century.

He was a great writer both in Bengali and English. His book on the life of Ramanuja in Bengali is considered a classic and gave to the North the details of the life of the Acharya till then little known. He contributed many articles to the *Udbodhan*, the Bengali journal of the Order. The book, *Universe and Man*, a collection of his discourses became the first publication of the Madras Math and received great appreciation from the then Yuvaraja of Mysore. Later some more of his discourses came in book form. We thus find him a scholar, a writer and a lecturer of no small repute. More than all this his life was an illustration of his teaching.

It was an education to be with Swami Ramakrishnananda. He was a strict disciplinarian having himself lived a life of austerity. But all his chastisements were for moulding the lives of the novitiates and not merely authoritarian. He loved these young men and liked to see them grow in spirituality. With their welfare at heart how could he keep aloof when they went wrong? The young monks though at first were cut to the quick soon came to know of the Swami's love for them and took the rebukes in the proper spirit. A young monk whom the Swami loved dearly, once went to see his parents and came back laden with presents

of clothes and a silk wrapper. Swami Ramakrishnananda noticed this, called him and asked as to whom the silk wrapper was meant. The young Swami in fear replied that it was for Swami Ramakrishnananda. The Swami took the wrapper and asked the junior monk to throw away all the clothes. When he had done so he said, 'For the safety of monastic life all memories of home are to be wiped off. Unless this is done how can a monk look upon every home as his own and the whole humanity as his family?'

He would not allow the rigid rules of his monastic life to be violated by any one. Once when he was away from the city Sister Devamata, who had earned a soft corner in his heart by her devoted disposition, finding his room untidy, swept it, put his bedding in the sun and neatly arranged the things. The Swami noticed it after his return, resented her action and did not fail to say that she was wrong in touching the bed of a monk and warned her against repeating such acts.

We have stated above of his love for the brother disciples during the Baranagore and Alambazar days. The flow of this love continued throughout his life. Swami Brahmananda, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna was not only loved but respected as the representative of the Master by him. When the former visited Madras he said to the devotees: 'You have not seen the Master but it is as good as seeing him if you see the son.' That this was his firm faith was seen when a devotee who brought some fruits for Sri Ramakrishna was asked to offer them to Swami Brahmananda.

His respect and reverence for the Holy Mother was equal to that which he had towards the Master. One of his great ambitions in life was to bring the Holy Mother to South India. When therefore she came he accompanied her in her tour, looked meticulously after all her conveniences and when after her sojourn she left for the North, Swami Ramakrishnananda said, 'My life's ambition is fulfilled.' He did not live long after this. Soon the excessive work which had been telling upon his health and the enervating climate of the South and the privations he had to undergo threw him a prey to the fell disease, phthisis. Doctors advised immediate change, the devotees entreated him to go to the North, but until he received orders from Swami Brahmananda he did not move from his place of duty. The disease however proved fatal and he passed away on August 21, 1911.

Such was the life of Swami Ramakrishnananda: a blazing fire of renunciation, an example of Guru bhakti and Guru seva, a teacher of great magnitude, an illustration of obedience and awareness of duty, and above all a heart soft like butter which melted at others' sufferings. Though it is more than half a century now after he has passed away, still his life sheds that lustre which clouds cannot hinder, nor darkness obstruct but guides all those who travel on the path of salvation.

¹ Katha Up. 1-2-23.

² Gita IV-34.