

The Contemplative Life – Most Revered Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj.

Most Revered Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj was the 15th President of the world -wide Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

In this article Most Revered Maharaj provides guidelines on how to lead a contemplative life citing many personal reminiscences of senior monks of the Ramakrishna tradition who lead inspiring spiritual lives.

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SADHAN-BHAJAN or spiritual practice – japa, prayer and meditation – should play a very vital role in the lives of all. This is a sure way to peace despite all the hindrances that one has to face in daily life. The usual complaint is that it is very difficult to lead an inward life of sadhana or contemplation amidst the rush and bustle of everyday life. But with earnestness and unshakable determination one is sure to succeed. Sri Ramakrishna has said that a devotee should hold on to the feet of the Lord with the right hand and clear the obstacles of everyday life with the other.

There are two primary obstacles to contemplative life. The first one is posed by personal internal weaknesses. One must have unswerving determination to surmount these. The second one consists of external problems. These we have to keep out, knowing them to be harmful impediments to our goal.

For success in contemplative life, one needs earnestness and regularity. Study of the scriptures, holy company, and quiet living help develop our inner lives. I have clearly seen that all the great swamis of our Order have led a life of contemplation even in the midst of great distractions. They lived this life amidst engagement in service to the Lord through whatever responsibility they were assigned. I have been very fortunate to have come in close contact with some of the very illustrious monks of our Order like the revered Swamis Virajananda, Achalananda, Shantananda, Jagadananda, Madhavananda, Nirvedananda, and Gadadharananda. Their lives have been wonderful. There was always a glow on their faces, and association with them was spiritually very inspiring, assuring one of the priceless value of sadhana.

One thing that is a very great power in all men of God is unaccountable love. You cannot explain why they love you. They don't ask anything in return. They do not ask that you become a monk or do anything in return. They just love you. This is something very, very wonderful. Whenever I visited Belur Math, I found this to be true. But the first monk to leave a deep impress on me was Swami Gadadharananda.

I was then doing my intermediate at Cotton College, Gauhati. During summer vacation, when I was visiting my home at Dinajpur, I came down with serious malaria with several complications. My father, who was a big Sanskrit pandit and a specialist in the Bhagavata, had gone to deliver a lecture at a function in a nearby school. Swami Gadadharananda was at that time the head of the Dinajpur centre (now in Bangladesh). He happened to meet my father at this function and found him very worried. He enquired about the reason and, on learning about my illness, asked if he could come and see me. My father of course welcomed him. Next I found a monk placing his hand on my head and chest – and to my surprise, and everybody else's, all problems were soon over! He had also spoken in such an affectionate and loving manner that I had at once felt drawn to him. So when I was cured I asked my father who the sannyasin was, and coming to know that he was the head of the nearby Ramakrishna Ashrama, went to meet him one day with some friends.

Swami Gadadharananda was very pleased to see us. He took us to the shrine there and introduced us to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda. He gave us prasad and asked us to come again. So I started frequenting the Ashrama. The swami gave me books like Swami Vivekananda's Lectures from Colombo to Almora, which I started reading. Knowing that I came from a Brahmin family with the tradition of worship at home, he asked me to do arati in the shrine and then also puja, even though I had not had my spiritual initiation as yet. After the arati he would ask me to meditate a little before returning home. I was deeply impressed.

In the morning, after mangalarati, he used to go out walking on the bank of the Kanchan River. Sometimes he would ask if I would like to go with him. During the walk he would suddenly ask: 'What are you thinking as you are walking? Always think of Him, of God. "Ho jaye tere nam vasa, ho jaye tere nam vasa; may your name become my refuge, may your name become my refuge." Whenever you walk here and there, you must mentally think like this.' He would find a nice place to sit by the riverbank, and would soon close his eyes and start meditating. What could I do? Not knowing what meditation was, I started imitating him.

He would be very still and appear very happy. I imitated him, and in this process, discovered something happening within.

The swami also allowed me to occasionally spend the night at the Ashrama. There were not many rooms there, so he let me stay in his own room. And there I saw something wonderful. Whenever I happened to wake up, at midnight or any other time, I found the swami sitting and meditating! I was amazed! You see how holy company works!

Swami Gadadharananda was nothing short of a saint. I have never seen him hating anyone. He was always ready to serve anybody in need. Even his way of collecting flowers, making garlands, and preparing for the arati impressed me. I could not help following him and assisting whenever possible.

As mentioned earlier, even before I met Swami Gadadharananda, I used to do puja at home. Ours was a religious home, and we had a tradition of thakur seva (service to the family deity). In the hostel also I used to do sandhya-vandana (daily devotions prescribed by the scriptures) regularly. That, however, was traditional. What I got from the ashrama was something totally different. An ashrama is a place full of spiritual vibrations. That is something inspiring, lively. But in one's home and family, it is a mere traditional way of life, and religious practice, a routine thing; there is not that life there.

Another person who greatly inspired me to take to monastic life was Swami Achalananda, popularly known as Kedar Baba. He was a very austere sadhu. When I first saw him at Belur Math, he was walking about clad only in a kaupina (loin cloth). Oh, his regular prayer, japa, and meditation! Even when his health was completely broken, out of twenty-four hours, his rest and other personal activities would take up at most six to eight hours.

I was in close contact with him. He used to come to Belur Math every year for two to three months and stay in the Leggett house, in the room where Holy Mother had lived. Whenever he used to come, I would go and clean his room and serve him a bit. Every day he would ask me to read the Kathamrita and would ask me, 'How much japa have you done?'

Once there was a feast at the Math. Next day Kedar Baba asked us how many rasgullas we had eaten. When I said that I had had two, he exclaimed, 'What? Two rasgullas, and that at night! And you want to be a monk and follow Swamiji! Impossible! Those who want to live a pure life

must eat a very light meal at night and be careful about sweets.’ He was a terrific inspiration.

I was in the Calcutta Students’ Home while pursuing my graduate studies, and there I came in close contact with Swami Nirvedananda, a real inspiration in every sense. He emphasized brahmacharya and a God-oriented life, especially for students.

Swami Shantananda was another great contemplative. He was a quiet man and talked very little, but you would always find him doing japa. I think, out of twenty-four hours, he would be doing japa for eighteen to twenty hours. Very sweet and very kind – that was Swami Shantananda. Even when he was down with tuberculosis, there was no change in his routine. When he was asked not to strain himself doing prolonged spiritual practice, he said that he could not do otherwise. And never did he give any external expression to the distress of disease.

Then there was Swami Madhavananda. Though he was the General Secretary, and very active, his life was very regular. He was very strict in matters of principle. But he also knew when to be considerate. Those who live this contemplative life regularly also work better. There is no doubt about it. There is nothing haphazard about their work. Whatever they do they do with all their heart, and as service to God.

Does it work the other way round too? For those who work well, do their inner lives also improve? Well, work alone will not do. The spirit behind the work is important. If you work with the spirit that it is service to God, then that work will be spiritually fruitful. Otherwise, well, everybody works. But their work and the work of a Ramakrishna Order monk is not the same. There are many doctors attending to patients. But there is a difference between their work and the service rendered by a monk to the sick. The monk’s spirit is that of service to Narayana, God. The other person doesn’t necessarily look upon the patient as an embodiment of God or any such thing. ‘He is a patient, I give treatment, and I get my fees, that’s all’ – that is the professional attitude.

For those who have heavy work responsibilities, will the simple maintenance of this attitude of service to God improve their meditative life? Yes! There is no doubt about it. Relief work or hospital work or school work or kitchen work or whatever – it is all His service. That spirit must be there. Then your inner life improves automatically. This is my own personal experience. I have derived tremendous joy from hospital work. I worked at the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama in Rangoon, a busy general hospital. I was also involved in the building of the

tuberculosis sanatorium in Ranchi, practically from the beginning. Oh, the joy! And when you worked with devotion, help came from the most unexpected quarters. We had to work hard. But I worked keeping in mind that this was service to the same Being to whom I offered flowers in the shrine. If He came in this shape and form, this was how I had to serve Him. But I also practised japa and meditation every day, irrespective of the time. That is the support one has to hold on to. For everybody that is a must, there is no question about that.

There were also occasions when I took time out from work. That time I spent in spiritual practices and scriptural study. I used to go to Swami Jagadananda and study Vedantic texts. Swami Jagadananda was a living embodiment of the spirit of Vedanta. I shall describe the scene of his passing, and from that you can have an understanding of his personality. He had had a heart attack and was gasping for breath. We had brought him to the Vrindaban Sevashrama for treatment. The doctors had declared that there was no hope of recovery and that he would collapse very soon. His legs were turning ice-cold. The doctors asked us to massage the legs with brandy. While I was doing that, he suddenly looked at me and exclaimed in his native Sylhet dialect: 'Kita karo? Kita karo? What are you doing? What are you doing?' 'Your legs are turning cold, so I am massaging them a little.' 'Massaging them a little!' he retorted. 'Satchidekam brahma! Brahman is Absolute Knowledge and Existence! Have you understood that, or not? Sarvam khalvidam brahma, all this is verily Brahman. Know and hold on to this!' And he was gone!

Are the joys of work and that of quiet contemplation and study equivalent? Yes, they are. But both are necessary for harmonious spiritual development.

I had also the opportunity to serve Swami Virajananda, the tenth (sic, sixth) President of the Order. His life too was very regular, in its own way. And he was very hard-working also. Everything that he did, he did thoroughly - everything! And he was a hard taskmaster too. He had his hours of deep contemplative moods. And he had a great sense of humour. Sometimes he would prepare some sweets and snacks and send them for the monks after having checked the number - you could not get two! We knew that there would be more in his stock, and that all of it was turning stale. Coming to know what we were thinking, he would remark sarcastically, 'Rotten! Rotten!' Then he would do some trick and send those foodstuffs to us; and lo! it was all very good and fresh! He would then ask, 'Now what are they doing, what are they doing?'

Even at the time of his passing away he retained this sense of humour. The doctors had given up hope and many sadhus had gathered in his room. When he saw that the sadhus were preparing to chant 'Hari Om Ramakrishna' (which is usually done at the final hour) he quipped: 'Ekhon na, ekhon na, deri ache; Not now, not now, there is still time.' But when the actual time came it was a sight to see: a beaming face, hair standing on end, and tears trickling down from the outer corners of the eyes - all signs of divine joy according to the scriptures.

Can householders also have equally inspiring lives? Yes, they can. Let me recall just one incident, again a parting scene: I heard that a certain devotee was on the verge of death. I went to see him. His wife was massaging his feet. He looked up and, seeing me, said, 'Bless me, so that I can reach the goal, the feet of the Master.' He was quiet for some time. Then he looked at his wife and said, 'Now the moment has come. Put charanamrit (holy water) here (in my mouth).' Having swallowed the charanamrit he uttered: 'Ramakrishna, Ramakrishna.' And that was the end.

So, both householder life and monastic life can equally be ways of developing oneself spiritually. But one must follow the right route. A monastic life that ends with the taking of gerua robes alone is nothing. You have your mantra; you have to make that mantra practically realized in your life. Then alone is your sannyasa worthwhile.

Let me conclude by recalling my own initiation from Swami Vijnanananda Maharaj, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. As he was giving us the mantra and reciting God's name, it appeared as if he was intoxicated. The atmosphere was indescribable. It is this divine intoxication that one seeks in leading the life of a contemplative. And on obtaining even a bit of that divine joy, one attains fulfillment.

Via Dr. Asuman Chouhan Gondia Maharashtra