

# *Invitation* **TO** **HOLY COMPANY**

Swami Jnanatmananda



# Invitation To Holy Company

*Being the memoirs of ten direct disciples of  
Sri Ramakrishna*

*Original in Bengali*  
By  
SWAMI JNANATMANANDA

*Translation*  
By  
PROF. J. N. DEY



**SRI RAMAKRISHNA MATH**

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## THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

This little book is a free translation of *Punyasmriti* (Sacred Memories) in Bengali written by myself and published from the Udbodhan Office, Calcutta. It contains my humble reminiscences of ten of the direct Sannyasin disciples of Sri Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna). I firmly believe that on account of some good merits in my previous births, I had the rare good fortune to sit at their feet and enjoy their holy company in various ways. The booklet is written mainly for purifying my soul, but I trust it will also benefit those who will read it and deeply ponder over its contents. As Sukadeva says in the *Srimad Bhagavata* to king Parikshit awaiting his death in a week, "O King, just as the holy Ganges flowing from the feet of the Lord Vishnu purifies the three worlds consisting of the Heaven, the Earth, and the Nether World (Patala), so also the discourses on the life and plays (Lila) of Vasudeva purify alike all the three concerned—the speakers, the listeners, and those who ponder over it." (Bh. 10.1. 16-17).

This small book, too, I hope, will serve the same purpose.

May the Lord bless us all!

Belur Math,  
West Bengal.

SWAMI JNANATMANANDA

## THE TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

As fortune would have it, I received requests from both Swami Jnanatmanandaji from Calcutta and Swami Tapasyanandaji from Madras at about the same time, to translate into English the former's Bengali book *Punyasmritiy* re-named in English as *Invitation to Holy Company*. Taking it to be the Lord's wish, I agreed to do so and the result is before the reader.

In this I have tried to make it a very faithful translation. But when the Bengali idiom could not be expressed literally in English, I have elaborated the thought a little to make the meaning clear. Many a time I have been charmed with the beauty of an expression or of a thought, and have stopped to enjoy it for minutes, and sometimes for hours. So I have a feeling that many a wayfarer like me along the path of religion, will find enough to enjoy in going through these pages, and will have ample reason to thank the author for having written this little book of sacred memories.

Barlowgunj, U.P.

J.N.DEY

## INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

*Invitation to Holy Company* is the work of a life-long Sannyasin, recording his intimate experiences with ten of the direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who may be designated as the Great Master's Apostles. They are fifteen in number, excluding Swami Vivekananda and the Holy Mother, but five<sup>1</sup> of them do not find a place here, because they had left their mortal coils before the writer had joined the monastic Order.

Readers of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, as a rule, feel that they have exhausted their study of the subject by reading the lives and works of the Holy Three —the Great Master, Swamiji and the Mother. This is an incorrect and imperfect view. The Great Master speaks to mankind through all those whom he made his 'own'. These fifteen are all included in that category. The Great Master is like a mighty tree. His roots are in the unseen, the infinite and the absolute Being, and he rises as a mighty tree before man's vision, dividing himself into several main branches, of Which no doubt the most massive are the Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. But there are several other substantial off-shoots from that tree adding to its foliage, its fruitage and the extensiveness of the protective shade it affords. These disciples are such branches, and a full study of the Master and his message requires an understanding of the life, personality and teachings of these disciples too.

It will be found that the variety of talents and of personality-types represented by these disciples is as varied as the phases of the Master's spiritual genius itself. In Swami Premananda we get a personality rich in faith, love and gentleness; in Swami Brahmananda, one who ever lived in the Atman-consciousness but yet possessed an all-sided

wisdom that could solve any complicated problem of monastic administration or organisational work; in Swami Turiyananda, a stern Vedantic ascetic whose austere nature always held the body in subordination and who remained aloof from all concerns of the world but yet was full of love and fellow-feeling for men; in Swami Shivananda, a tower of spiritual strength ever surrounded by an aura of love and knowledge but yet actively concerned with the welfare of men; in Swami Abhedananda, an erudite scholar and an ascetic missionary who spent the best part of his life in preaching the Vedanta abroad; in Swami Vijnanananda, a true Vijnani, who, having ascended the summits of enlightenment, none the-less adopted the nature of an innocent child (*Pāndityam nirvidya bālyena tiṣṭhāset*); in Swami Akhandananda, an intrepid pilgrim and devout contemplative turned later into a servant of God in man; in Swami Subodhananda, one who ever remained a 'boy' in spite of his wisdom; in Swami Saradananda, a scholar-Sannyasin of unperturbed temperament with unparalleled capacities for shouldering onerous responsibilities, and in Swami Adbhutananda, a village shepherd boy turned by the Master's magic touch into a great Sannyasin and a man of wisdom.

These great disciples with such diverse talents, capacities and backgrounds were forged into a unified spiritual Brotherhood by the love of the Great Master and the sense of a 'mission' that he imparted to them. Generally the disciples of a spiritual personage of ordinary calibre seek their own individual spiritual purposes and move apart after the teacher's demise. It is only the Incarnations, the teachers commissioned by the Divine, that could impart to their disciples a sense of Brotherhood, consolidated by the cement of mutual love and respect, and a feeling of commitment on their part to preserve and transmit certain spiritual values and experiences that their venerable teacher had handed over to them. Human relationship, even at higher levels, is plagued with innumerable vicissitudes caused by clash of personalities and man's sense of self-importance, and it is only mutual love, tolerance and a reverential allegiance to a common cause that can overcome the tensions generated thereby. A spiritual Brotherhood is the end-product of countless acts of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, of forgiving love



and unflinching faithfulness. Only souls, afire with divine love and the urge to share the experience of it with others in all humility and self-effacement can forge its links. It is such a spiritual Brotherhood, brought into existence by these direct disciples under the influence of the creative warmth of the Master's love, that has provided the cultural vehicle for the preservation and transmission of the spiritual efficiencies brought into being by the Great Master.

A proper understanding of these great disciples in the right perspective is therefore a 'must' for any deep student and sincere devotee of Sri Ramakrishna's life and message. All the great incarnations reveal their message as much through the type of loving relationship they maintain towards their associates as through the verbal instructions they impart. If Rama is to be understood, one has to go into his relationship with Sita, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Vibhishana, etc., and so a study of him includes a study of them too. The same is the case with Sri Krishna, the Buddha, Chaitanya and other Incarnations, including the Great Master.

Viewed in this light, the present book assumes considerable importance in the body of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, giving as it does, not a mere biographical account, but a pen-picture of ten of these great ones in the rich colours of personal impressions born of intimate contact in daily life. Many of the incidents narrated may be insignificant in their external dimensions, but in estimating the spiritual worth of the persons concerned, in revealing the ethereal springs of thought and action in them, they are of immense value in the hands of a keen and careful observer who could also put together his impressions in a coherent and connected literary form. Swami Jnanatmananda, who had ample opportunities of meeting, talking with, and attending on many of these Mahatmas, has also this literary gift of effective presentation of his impressions, which has materialised in the form of this small book entitled in the original Bengali as *Punyasmriti* and re-named in the English translation as *Invitation to Holy Company*. The great ones are brought out so vividly in these pen-pictures that the readers are enabled to bathe themselves in the waters of blissful love

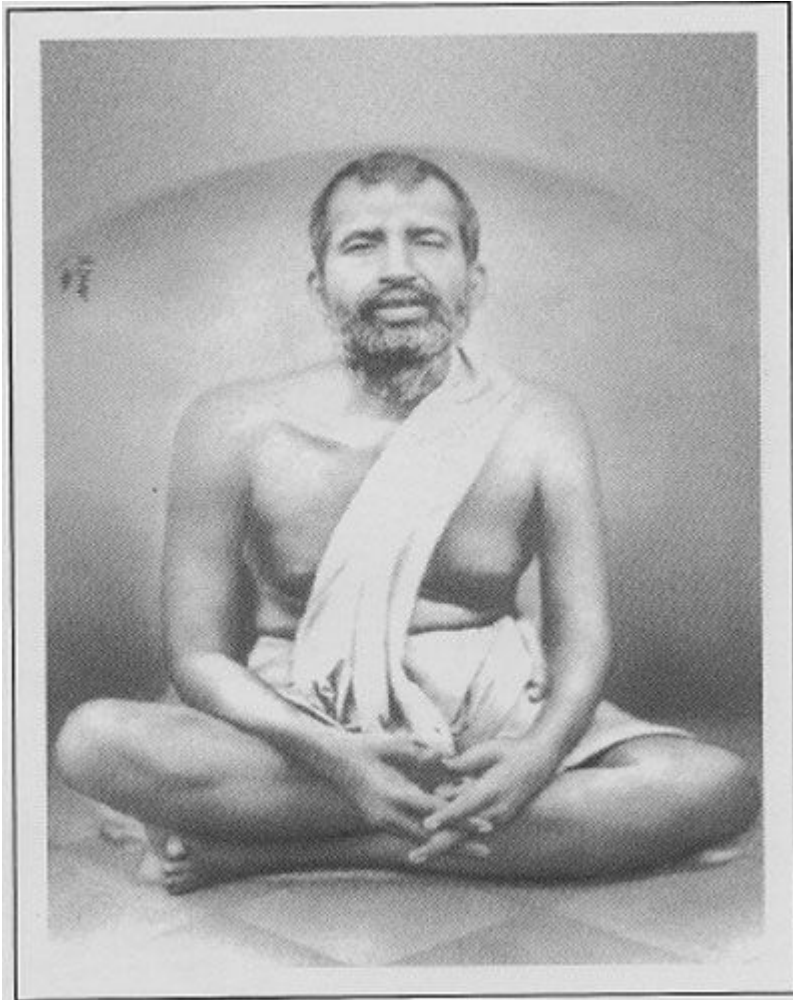
that is the Great Master, surging through the perennial springs constituted of these great disciples.

It is hoped that the study of these accounts will induce readers to learn more of these great direct disciples, about whom there is an abundance of good literature in English at present. On Swami Brahmananda there is the *Eternal Companion*, giving his biography and conversations; on Swami Shivananda, a life-study entitled '*A Man of God*'; on Swami Turiyananda, a biography; on Swami Akhandananda, his memoirs *From Holy Wanderings to Service of God in man*; and on Swami Abhedananda, his complete works in eleven volumes. Besides, among the Apostles not included herein is Swami Ramakrishnananda, on whom there is a book giving his biography and reminiscences, besides a few volumes containing his lectures and writings. A study of all these and other allied books is an integral part of the study of Sri Ramakrishna and his message.

Sri Ramakrishna Math,  
Madras, 1-1-79

SWAMI TAPASYANANDA

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1. The five are: Swamis Advaitananda, Yogananda, Trigunatitananda, Ramakrishnananda and Niranjanananda.



SRI RAMAKRISHNA



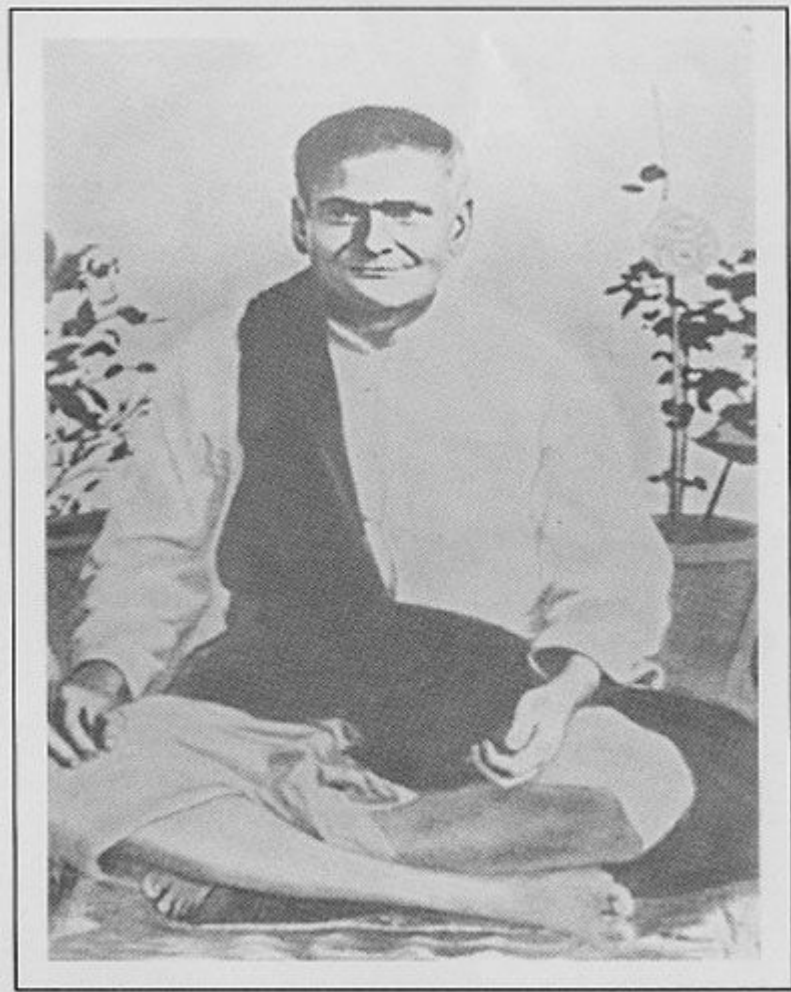
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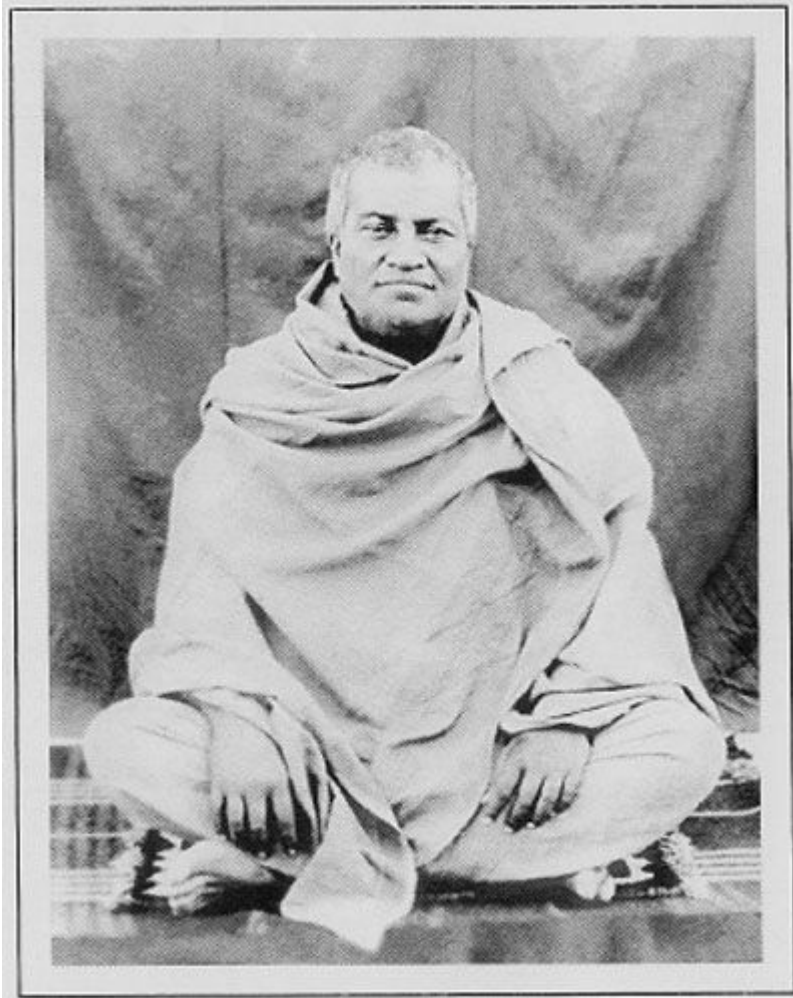
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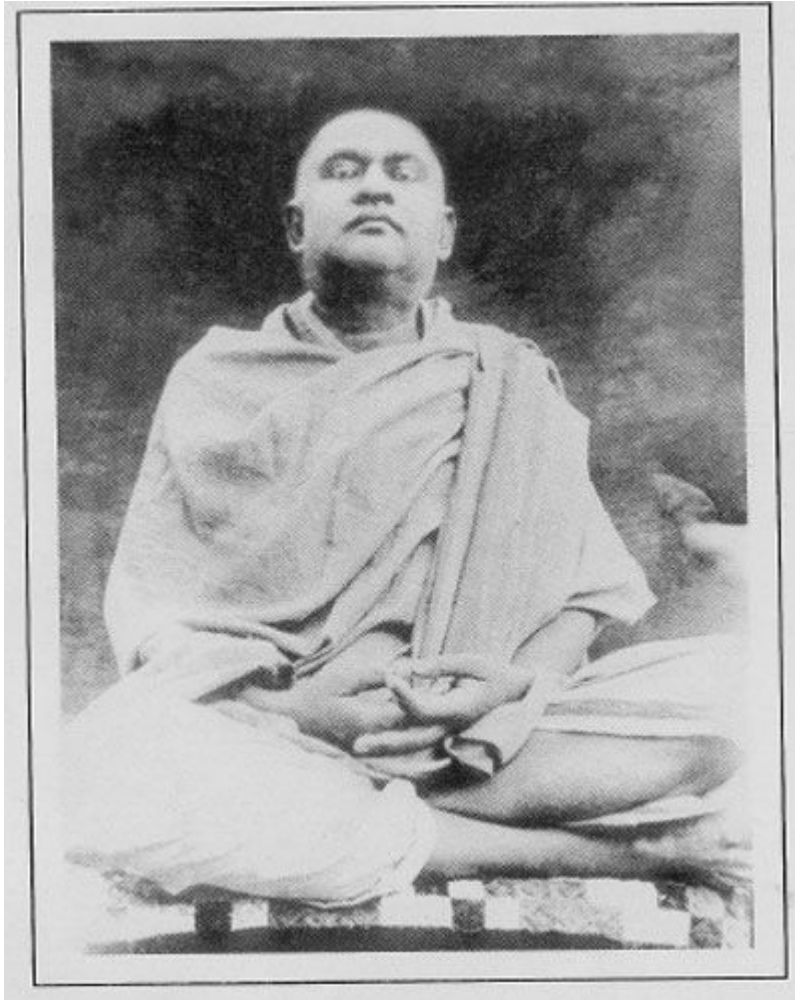


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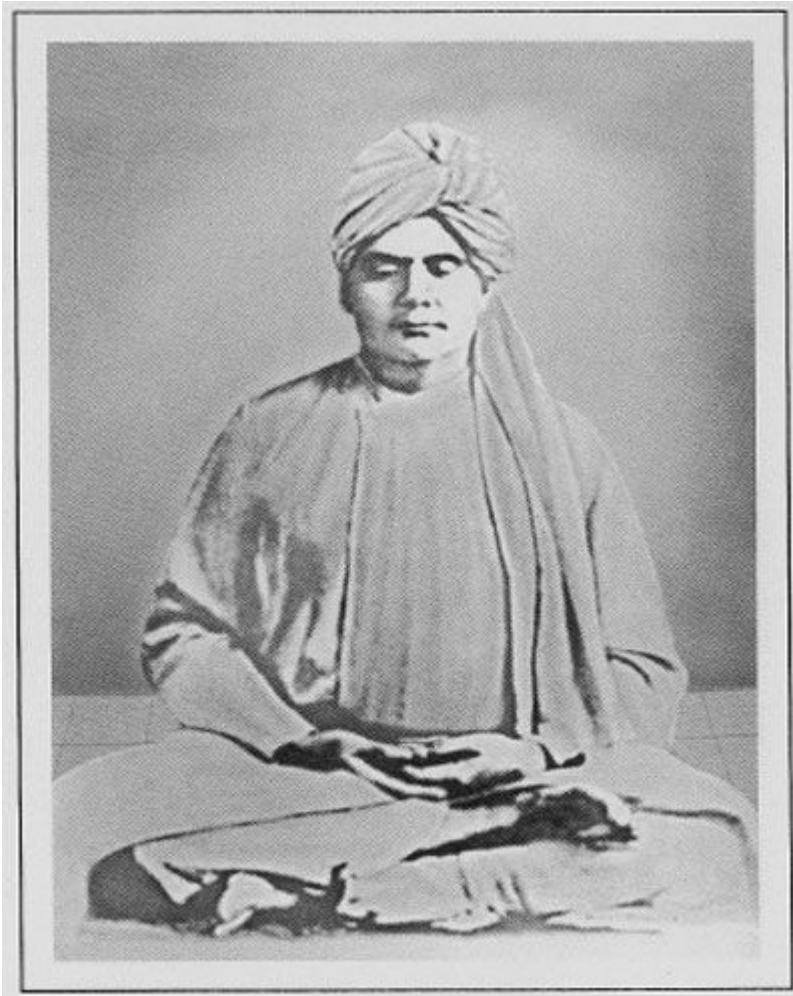


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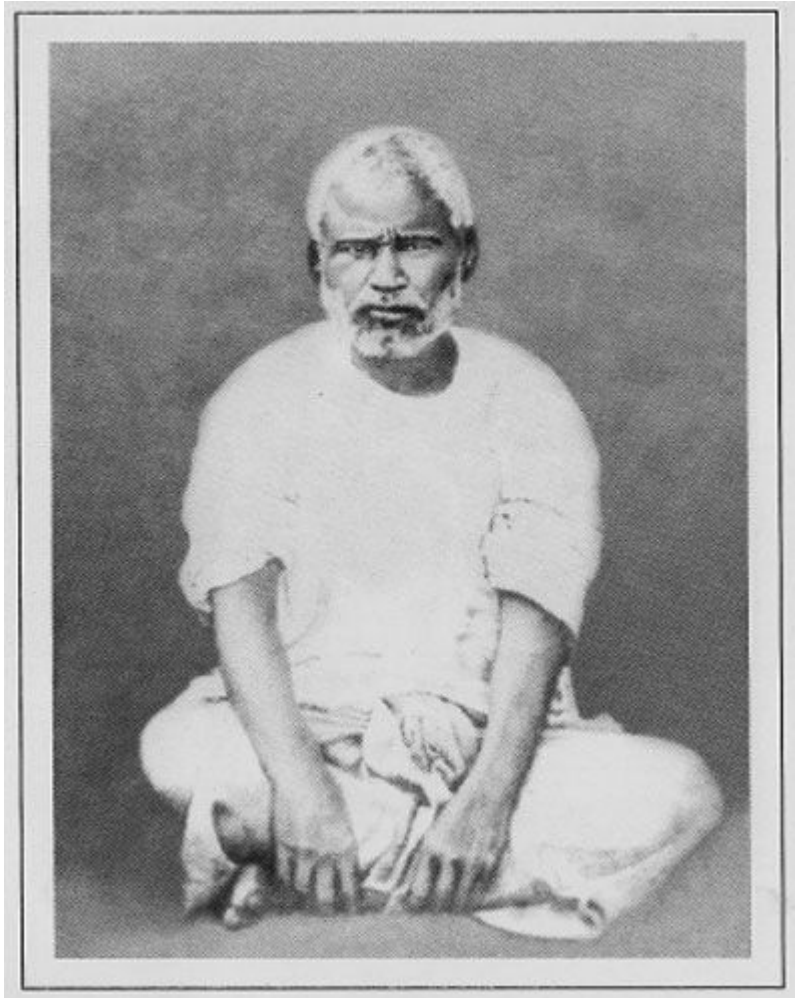




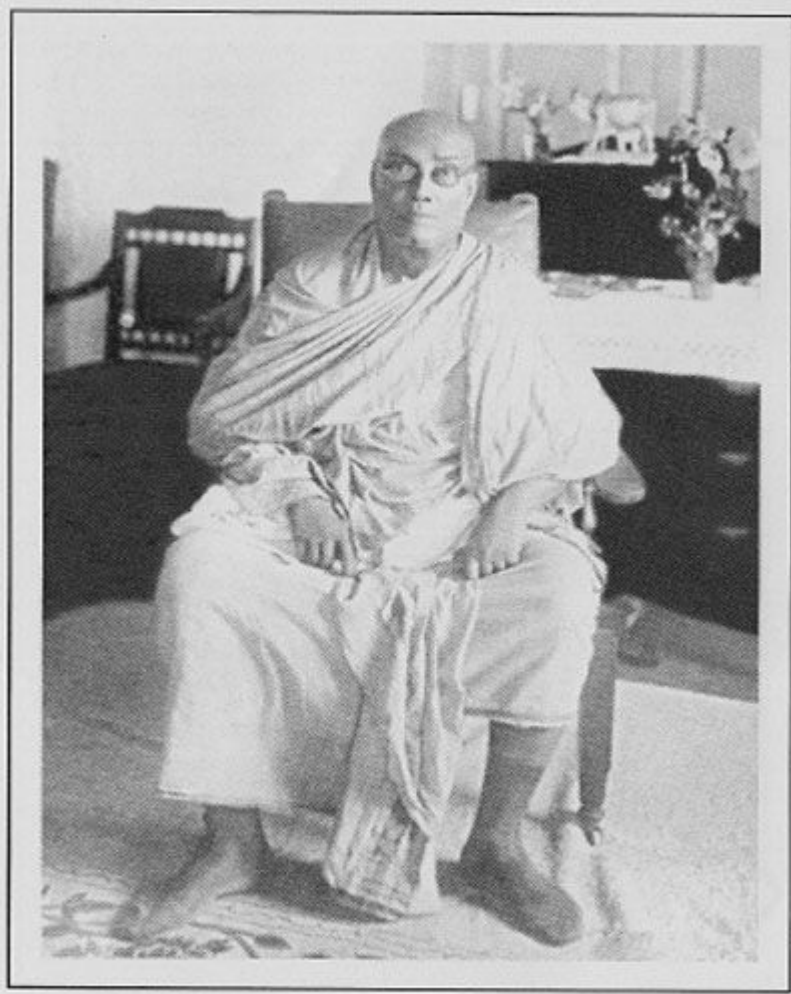
SWAMI BRAHMANANDA



SWAMI ABHEDANANDA



SWAMI ADBHUTANANDA



SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

## CHAPTER I

## SWAMI PREMANANDA (1861-1918)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Born in 1861, Swami Premananda, known in his early days as Baburam, came, even when a young school boy, under Sri Ramakrishna's influence. The Master used to designate him as an Iswarakoti, one born with divine perfections. Though given to a purely contemplative life in his early days as a Sannyasin, he took afterwards an active part in the work of the Math and the Mission as organised by Swami Vivekananda. For a long time he was the manager of the Belur Math, in which capacity he had to take heavy responsibilities and have wide public contacts. His immense faith in the Master, his sweet and engaging temperament, his very generous nature, and his fervent devotional spirit made him a centre of attraction to devotees, especially to the considerable body of young men who used to visit the Math. Many a young man with violent political inclinations or given to unbecoming ways of life, was brought into the spiritual fold by his influence and made into a saintly character. In originating the early monastic traditions of the Belur Math and in the formation of the life and character of many of its pioneer workers he played a conspicuous part. After years of dedicated service he passed away in 1918.

It was most probably in the year 1915 that I went to the Belur Math for the first time. I was then reading in the third year in a college at Calcutta. Before this, when I was at school in a mofussil town, I had the good fortune of coming across some books of Swami Vivekananda. But my teacher, who lent me these books, had asked me to read them in private. For, agitation connected with the partition of Bengal had already started then, and it was the feeling in governmental circles and among many educated people that the Swami Vivekananda literature had given inspiration to it. Although I was in my early teens, I was proud to have taken some active part in this agitation. I used to feel in my heart of hearts that the country had no chance of improvement unless it was rid of foreign rule. That was why, after reading Swamiji's books secretly, I thought that he too was an active anarchist. And I felt certain that, had he been living then, he would have become a great political leader. Again, sitting in that far off village, I would hear from some teacher or gentleman coming from Calcutta, that the Belur Math established by Swamiji was just like the 'Ananda Math' so beautifully described by the great Bengali writer Bankim Babu, and that the Sannyasins of this Math were hatching plans to drive away the English just like the Sannyasins in the Math conceived by Bankim in his fiction. These tidings would fill my heart with joy and pride.

But when I passed out of the High School and came to Calcutta, I was placed in a completely different environment, and so there was no more any eagerness in my mind to know anything about Swamiji or the Belur Math established by him. There I first got admission into a Brahmo College and then into a Christian College, where there was no opportunity to talk about such subjects. My guardians at the establishment where I lived in Calcutta were always concerned with their own business, and so I never heard a word about Swamiji or the Belur Math from them.

Thus two years passed. In the third year (1915), a certain young man of my age came to me one day and said, "This evening there will be held a meeting at the Belur Math about Swami Vivekananda, through the efforts of the Parseebagan Ramakrishna Association. If you like, you too may accompany me there." I at once agreed to the proposal and started getting ready to go, when a gentleman of rather advanced age, who had come there recently, said: "If you are going to the Belur Math, please take me also along with you. A son of mine is staying there as a Brahmachari." At this we were filled with great joy. At the appointed time we started for the Belur Math, with him for our companion.

We reached there a little before the meeting started. As the elderly gentleman was well known to many Sannyasins there, they got very busy with him. We also in the mean time went round the whole of the Math. We had expected that the Math would be like a Mandir (temple) with a pinnacle. But what we found instead, were two buildings, one of which contained the Shrine while the other housed the living quarters of the resident monastics. Besides these, there was no other building at that time. There was only a big vacant meadow to the south. Seeing all this, the thought crossed my mind that perhaps there was a printing mistake in what had come out in the papers about 'Belur Math'—it should have been 'Belur Meadow'!

The meeting started punctually. On one side of the forum there was placed a well decorated big picture of Swamiji as 'wandering monk'. I was very much attracted by that picture. The thought came to me that it was indeed such a Sannyasin that was needed—one who, without even

a penny in his pocket, would go through the whole of India from one end to the other taking shelter with her people from the Brahmanas to the Untouchables and thus knew the real heart-beat of the motherland. At the beginning of the meeting, my classmate Dayamoy Mittra (Bhulu Babu) recited Swamiji's poem, 'The Song of the Sannyasin'. I did not know then that he was the grandson of Yogin Ma who had her initiation from Sri Thakur<sup>1</sup> himself, and that he lived at the Udbodhan. So, seeing him recite the song standing amongst so many Sannyasins, I had a rather unfavourable impression in my mind. Anyway, the meeting started and a gentleman of advanced age read a paper on Swamiji on behalf of the Parseebagan Ramakrishna Association. In the course of his reading when dealing with Swamiji's Chicago Address, he said that it was verily the trumpet (horn) of Siva that was sounded that day. I still remember how all the hair on my body stood on end. On hearing this I thought that it was indeed so; for who else had expressed so well the heart-throb of the down-trodden India in that World Parliament ? Who had cared to say that India was still living ? Who else had said that it would be her eternal spiritual message that would one day rejuvenate the wide world ?

The meeting came to an end. As we were getting ready to return, a slim, fair-complexioned Sannyasin approached us and said that none of us should leave the place without taking Sri Thakur's Prasad (consecrated offering). This humble entreaty of his struck me as a novelty; for I had never been so accosted at the end of any such function at Calcutta. Later on we were told that he was Baburam Maharaj or Swami Premananda, through the attraction of whose love many devotees and educated young men were collecting every day at the Math and were considering themselves blessed by receiving the Prasad of Sri Thakur.

For the next two years, I did not go to the Math. The memory of the Math and of the revered Baburam Maharaj had more or less faded away from my mind. Then, when I was in the fifth year of the Calcutta University, a friend of mine, Nirode Sanyal, who was later known as Swami Akhilananda, came to me one day and said, "A few of us, friends,



are going together to a beautiful place. Why not come along with us?" The temptation of seeing a new place made me agree to the proposal, and we reached the Howrah station duly. There I found my classmates Ananga Niyogee, Jiten Biswas and Dwijen Choudhury waiting for us. (They were in later life known respectively as Swami Omkarananda, Swami Viswananda, and Swami Vividishananda in the Ramakrishna Order). I did not know that these in their spare time often visited the Belur Math. Presently we bought tickets for the Lilooa station and proceeded on our journey discussing various topics. Till then I had not heard from any of them that we were going to the Belur Math. The previous day the police had conducted an intensive search of about sixty houses in Dacca in East Bengal, for political reasons. This was the main topic of our discussion—how such atrocities were being perpetrated by the then British Government.

Soon we reached the old gate, (the then front entrance) of the Belur Math. Even then I did not know that it was the front entrance to the Math. But I saw that my friends, as soon as they came near it, made prostration, touching their foreheads to the ground. One of them asked us all to stop further talk and said that we had reached the great place of pilgrimage—the Belur Math. Before this, one of them asked me, "What do you say—which is the greater concern, politics or religion?" The rest of them answered that religion was the greater one. I was then taking an active part in politics. So this reply of theirs did not please me at all. I thought that this was a sign of their weakness. So I remonstrated, saying, "I have no faith in that religion which is not connected with the present-day politics. The first thing necessary now is that the country should attain its freedom. But then, if we have no religion connected with it, the movement may go astray. That is why it is necessary that religion and politics should go hand in hand." The thought had never crossed my mind so far that my friends were trying to find out my way of thinking. Now getting some idea of it, one of them said, "Yes, what he says is right. We should take to both at the present time," I was soon to know that he said this just to pacify me for the time being.

Crossing the meadow of the Math, we reached the Shrine of Sri Thakur. Going up the stairs of the Shrine each one of my friends made obeisance to Sri Thakur with great devotion. I also did likewise.

When we came down, we found that the fair-complexioned, slim Sannyasin whom I had met before, was sitting on a bench. Around him were sitting a few devotees. We made obeisance to him with devotion, found a place for ourselves amongst the devotees, and sat down. We did not know what they had been talking about prior to our arrival. A fresh question seemed to have been put to the Sannyasin just then by one of the devotees there. Later I came to know that this gentleman was Sri Surendranath Chakravarty, later Secretary of the Calcutta Medical College, who carried the nick-name of Hegel on account of his highly argumentative nature. He asked the Sannyasin, “Maharaj, just see what has caught hold of the young men of this country. They are now ready to offer their tender heads for the motherland. And what are you all doing, sitting here? You are simply feeding us with ‘Khichuri’ and propagating the name of Thakur. Is this the religion for the present day?” The revered Maharaj kept quiet for a little while. Then he pointed his finger to the warrior-like picture of Swamiji, which was hanging above a nearby door—the picture that was taken when Swamiji first addressed the Parliament of Religions at Chicago. Pointing to it, he said, “Just see, if your country had the need of a political or a social leader wouldn’t Sri Thakur have sent him to you as one such leader? Instead of that, what did he do? He made him only a penniless Sannyasin with a loin-cloth. Seeing even this, are you not realising what the real need of your country is or what your ideal should be ?” But Hegel was not the man to be silenced thus. He replied, “But whatever you may say, do you think that it is a Kamandalu (waterpot carried by a Sannyasin) that suits his hand? Would not a sword hanging from the belt be the right thing for him?” Without saying anything in reply to this, Baburam Maharaj only started chanting ‘*Hari bol*’, *Hari bol*’ (Take the name of Hari). At this Hegel said, “That is the only retort you can give. Whenever you get into a fix, you only chant ‘*Hari bol*’, ‘*Hari bol*.’” Not paying the least attention to this, Sri Baburam Maharaj simply sat there sedate, his

face radiating divine bliss. It was this event, I think, that first planted the seed of religion in my heart, quite unknown to myself.

After sometime, a bell rang to announce that the Prasad would now be taken out of the Shrine Room. At this Baburam Maharaj broke his silence and called out, "Oh, you there! The devotees have come. Give them Prasad, give them Prasad!" As far as I remember, this bell rang twice in the morning, once at noon, and most probably twice in the evening, and Baburam Maharaj had Prasad distributed to us every time. But I laughed within myself on every occasion and said to myself, "Ah, how nicely indeed has he recognised devotees! And to think that these are the fellow-disciples of the great intellectual and spiritual giant Swami Vivekananda!" My friends, however, told me later on that Baburam Maharaj would say, "Whether I understand the greatness of Sri Thakur or not, I fully realise the great quality of his Prasad. One who has eaten it even once, will certainly have devotion growing in him." But I did not understand this at all then. Some two or three years after this, when through the grace of revered Hari Maharaj and Mahapurush Maharaj I joined the Belur Math as a monastic, the thought came to me that at last the dormant seed of religion had indeed sprouted in me by God's grace.

After the above visit, I had the good fortune of having *darsan* (meeting) of Sri Baburam Maharaj a couple of times or so, through the persuasion of my friends. But then I was very busy with violent politics. That was why I had requested my friends, "Please let me alone. I cannot put my feet in two boats at one and the same time. Let me be in politics now. Afterwards, if the time comes, I shall try to lead a religious life as shown by you."

The Lord had most probably heard this statement of mine, unknown to me; for actually that was what came to pass. Shortly after this, I was interned for more than a year for my active politics. Later on, it was through the unbounded grace of revered Hari Maharaj that my religious life started, and I happened to join the Math. But during this period of internment, I do not know why, from time to time, the wonderful divine face of that loving Premananda Maharaj would float before my mind's

eye. After I came out of internment, when I asked my friends about him, I was told, to my great sorrow, that he had since left the body.

I joined the Math in 1920. I found the whole atmosphere of the Math still surcharged with the influence of Sri Baburam Maharaj. Even in later days, the then president of the Math, Sri Mahapurush Maharaj, would say, "Look here, you have seen Baburam Maharaj and have received instructions from him. So please carry on with your life and work at the Math exactly as he wanted. I have nothing further to add to it. May his divine love give you inspiration!" In the meantime, I came to know that it was after inundating the whole of Eastern Bengal with his love, that he met with an untimely end. Numbers of Hindus and Muslims of East Bengal had accepted his guidance in their spiritual life. When he was returning from that country, it was said that the cultivating Muslims left their fields, and catching hold of his palanquin, lamented loudly, saying that their 'pir' (a Muslim holy person) was leaving them.

It was two or three years after I had joined the Math that I was sent to the Dacca Ashrama as a worker. There, to my great surprise, I found that the kitchen of the Ashrama, where the food for Thakur's offering was cooked, was built as *Asan Smriti Manzil* (construction in memory of Asan) by Bibi Akhtar Banu, the daughter of the late Nawab Asanullah of Dacca. The reason for my surprise was that a few years back I had seen in the papers that it was the then Nawab of Dacca, Salimullah, the brother of this very lady, who was made a tool by the British Government for perpetrating inhuman atrocities on the Hindus of that locality. Later on I heard that this remarkable transformation was the result of the unique love of Swami Premananda Maharaj. When he had come to Dacca, he had surcharged both the Hindus and the Muslims of the place with his wonderful Prema (love). He had even gone into the palace of the Nawab of Dacca, a place practically inaccessible to the Hindus, and had communicated to the ladies and gentlemen of the place, the wonderful message of divine love.

A few days after my coming, I found that a huge car (cars were a rarity then) full of fruits had come from the garden of Bibi (Akhtar

Banu), as she had requested that these ripe fruits be offered to Sri Thakur as Bhoga (offering). The thought came to me that this was again another evidence of Swami Premanandaji's love.

Sometime after this, I was charmed to witness another evidence of his love, and I realised how much can be achieved by divine love. One day, a few of us, friends, were sitting on the verandah of the Math, when a noble gentleman of pleasing countenance, clad in 'dhoti' and 'chaddar', approached us, gently greeted us and introduced himself as a disciple of Swami Premanandaji. Amazed, we told him, "He was not in the habit of giving 'initiation' to anybody. How did you manage to get initiation from him?" He replied, "It is indeed true that he did not give what you call 'initiation'. But what he said to me has acted as an 'initiation' for me, and I am trying to mould my life accordingly." To our greater wonder, by way of giving more about himself, he said that he was a Muslim by the name of Mohammed.. He was a teacher in the local Jubilee School (where only Muslim students were admitted). A few days after this, he again came to us and to our further surprise said, "The Birthday Celebration of Swamiji is almost on us. On that occasion there will be the feeding of several thousands of the poor without discrimination of caste or creed. I have a great desire that, along with a few students of mine, I also join the function and help you a little in this work of service."

He was put in charge of a certain section in the celebration. The next day he came with his students, took charge of the camp allotted to him, and with great devotion carried out his part of the work very efficiently. At the end of the function he and his students joined us all very happily in partaking of the Prasad, and then returned to their respective homes.

This was an example of Swami Premanandaji's divine love, getting a particle of which my life has been blessed —a love in which there was no distinction of caste or religion, time or place. Whoever has received even a little of it, has become blessed. *Na teshu jati-kula-bhedah* — among them (the lovers of God) there is no distinction of caste or lineage (*Narada Bhakti Sutras*).

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1. This is the reverential expression with which Sri Ramakrishna is referred to in devotional circles.

## CHAPTER II

## SWAMI TURIYANANDA (1863-1922)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Born in 1863, Swami Turiyananda, who was also called Hari Maharaj after his pre-monastic name, came under the influence of the Great Master at an early age. Given to extremely ascetic ways of living from boyhood, he was by nature a contemplative recluse and a Vedantic scholar. Swami Vivekananda, however, managed to take him to the West to put before his disciples there an ideal of a God-conscious ascetic, a *Sthitaprajna*. He was in America between 1899-1903. After his return he spent about eight years as a recluse in holy places, depending on chance food. No physical ailment or inconvenience could make his Atman-consciousness weak. His life was that of an ideal Vedantin. He did not take any active part in the philanthropic activities or organisational work which Swami Vivekananda initiated. But though himself a recluse and a contemplative, he encouraged the young men joining the Order to devote themselves whole-heartedly to the type of Karma Yoga preached by Swamiji. His last few years were spent in the Benares Home of Service, a centre of work. Though staying there in retirement, he spent all his time in contemplation and in instructing devotees. He was a source of spiritual inspiration to many people, especially to the young men who flocked to him in those days. The fire of renunciation that he lit in the hearts of many of them made them choose the monastic way of life. He passed away at Varanasi in 1922. A translation of the *Vivekacudamani* by Swami Turiyananda as also his biography have been published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras. Besides, many of his instructive conversations and letters have been recorded, and published, and thus made available in the Ramakrishna Math Publications. They convey his sacred memory to posterity.

It was a long time back—may be 1919 or 1920—that I went to Varanasi, mainly to recoup my health. The idea of a pilgrimage to that holy place was not in my mind then. I used to live in Bengali Tola and often go for a walk to Dasaswamedh Ghat morning and evening.

One day, as I was taking a walk, I happened to meet two of my friends who were my classmates too. After the preliminary exchange of pleasantries, one of them suddenly asked me, “Haven’t you been to the local Ramakrishna Mission so far?” On my answering in the negative, he said, “It is a fine place, you must go there once. We go there often”. The other friend said, “Yes, please, do go. There is an America-returned Sannyasin. You will be able to get acquainted with him.” At this my lips curved in a derisive smile and I let him know by signs that it wasn’t much of an attraction for me. But the friends would not take a ‘No’ for an answer. Because of their persistence, I had ultimately to go to the ‘America-returned’ Sannyasin—Swami Turiyananda or the revered Hari Maharaj.



The day I went to him first, I remember well, I met there quite a number of Sannyasins of both the Ramakrishna Centres at Varanasi—the Advaita Ashrama and the Sevasrama. My doubting mind could not feel devotion to many of them. So although my friend, who accompanied me, made prostration to all of them touching their feet one after another, I made such salutation only to one or two of them.

When, however, I first cast my eyes on the great soul staying at Ambika Dham, an edifice situated at one corner of the Sevasrama, his serene appearance and sweet disposition made my head bow before him even involuntarily. After this, owing to the persuasion of my zealous friend and the attraction of the love that this great soul bore for me, I was forced to go to him practically every day. He, too, used to listen with great attention to all that I had to say, sometimes laughing very heartily at my childish frivolity and at others rebuking me very sharply by way of correcting my mistakes. Thus I remember how one evening, when I was walking with him, he said, showing me the great rush of people collecting at Varanasi, “Just see how great their devotion is! Tonight there will be the lunar eclipse. See, subjecting themselves to what great difficulties have they gathered from great distances! By bathing in the Ganga during the time of the eclipse, they will be purified. Taking the name of the Lord, then, they will become blessed!”

But we had a modern education. We had learnt what astronomy had to say about the lunar eclipse. So at these words of the Swami, I burst out laughing. I told him, ‘Maharaj, this is nothing but pure superstition. Rahu never swallows the moon. It is because the shadow of the earth falls on the moon, that we see the lunar eclipse. How can we believe that people will attain merit, when it is superstition that makes them take a bath? At this the Maharaj too burst out laughing and said, “I see, you have understood everything!” The next day when I went to see him, he addressed me very lovingly, ‘Look here, yesterday you said something about the eclipse. Well, it has a meaning. The makers of our Sastras (scriptures) were utterly without any consideration of personal gain. It was not with any selfish motive that they had introduced these observances for acquiring merit, in our Sastras. Their wish was that

everybody should advance towards God. But the same method will not do for every one. The individuality of each one has to be taken into account. That is the reason why we have three types of conduct in our Sastras. For those of the highest class, the Sastras say: 'Take the name of the Lord every day, even under difficult circumstances. It will give you peace. This is the law.' Accordingly, they take the name of the Lord every day. For those who are not able to do so, they prescribe something which gives them expectation of some pleasure or gain, by the attraction of which, they turn their mind towards God. And for those who would not take the name of the Lord even then, they prescribe the 'Danda-niti' (the code of punishment), by which they put the fear of hell and other punishments into their hearts. 'That by having a bath during the eclipse one acquires merit or gains eternal heaven', may be classed as a commandment for the ignorant. The idea of the Sastras is that it is good that people take the name of the Lord at heart occasionally, even be it due to fear or superstition."

I am reminded of another day, when talking about the virtue of bathing in the Ganga, I had laughingly told the Swami, "Maharaj, why should one attain a special merit by having a bath in the Ganga? The Ganga is after all only a river. And the Ganga at Varanasi cannot even be called that. It is winter now, and the Ganga does not have much of a current even." Hearing this, the Swami turned very grave and said, 'So you have learnt to belittle the Ganga simply because you have read a few English books. But do you know how hard Swamiji had hit at this disrespectful mentality towards our sacred traditions, cultivated by those who have acquired some English education? Oh! how he would lose himself while chanting the hymn to the Ganga! And why he alone! How many of them, from Acharya Sankara downwards, have sung hymns in praise of the Ganga! Try to have some Sraddha (reverence and faith)."

During this period when I was having his holy company, the revered Swamiji one day said, "Have you read the Gita? Starting from tomorrow, we shall read the Gita with Sri Gurudas Gupta (a professor of the Narail College, who was sitting near him). You may also join if you like." I

gladly agreed to do so. Though very sick himself, he started teaching us the Gita from the next day. I had read something of the Gita before. But coming from the lips of this learned monk, it acquired a new dimension. Usually he did not mention any annotation or commentary, but would explain the text in plain simple language. But whenever he felt the necessity, he would quote from memory the opinions of Sankara or Sridhara. We started our reading from the 6th Chapter. After finishing the eighteenth Chapter from there onwards, he taught us from the first to the fifth Chapter. Perhaps the reason for his starting from the 6th Chapter was that we might have control over our fluctuating mind and calm it down to get itself merged in *atma chinta* (reflection on the self).

As my mind was immature then, what I heard did not make a permanent impression, and I can recall very little of it now. But I have a recollection that on the subject of controlling the mind, he said that it was very difficult to do so, and that was why the Lord had asked us to get slowly 'established in oneself' by discrimination. In connection with this, the Swamiji said, "A devotee from America had written to me about it. In reply I wrote to him that whenever he sat for meditation, he should think that there was hanging in front of his chest the notice 'No Admission,' indicating that nothing except the thought of his 'Ishtam' (Chosen Deity), should enter there. This way, disturbing thoughts can gradually be eliminated. The devotee later acknowledged that he was much benefited by this advice." In this very Chapter when we were reading for the first time '*Uddharedatmanatmanam*,' he again and again repeated it in a deep voice with much feeling. For a long time after this, whenever I went and made salutation to him, he would repeat it in the same vein, and would say, "Yes, that is how you have to emancipate yourself—there is nobody other than yourself, who is your emancipator."

In this connection, let me recall one instruction he gave me once when I went to him for advice. I found him just starting out by the Advaita Ashrama gate. As I made salutations to him, he asked, "What is it that brings you here now?" When I told him of the great desire of my heart, he said, "First, open your eyes. Then the spectacles would be

provided. There is no sense in giving the spectacles first.” He would again and again lay stress on self-effort.

After I had returned to Calcutta at his advice to finish my education, I wrote to him once asking for his blessings, so that I might not be caught up again in bondage. His reply was: “When the idea of bondage comes in the mind, then there is bondage; otherwise, who can bind you? You are always free.”

Thus although he would encourage us in various ways to read the Gita, it was not always in a grave mood that he taught. Through humour and sarcasm also he would teach. When he was once explaining the fifteenth Chapter of the Gita, the topic of cutting down the “Tree of the World’ without showing any mercy, arose. He made a show of great gravity and said, “No, No, ‘Su’ (Sudhir was my former name). Please do not read this portion.” I was taken aback and asked him, “Why, Maharaj?” In reply he said, maintaining the same attitude of gravity, “Does it not deal with renunciation! Should you read such trash!” At this I burst into laughter, catching the point of his indirect criticism, and he too joined me with his natural loud laughter. It did not at first cross my mind that this was his way of igniting within me the fire of renunciation.

Swami Turiyananda always exhorted the young men who visited him to grow up into persons of faith and fortitude. Painting the picture of Swamiji on the canvas of their minds, he would say, “Just see, Swamiji alone was the real boy (male)—and you all? You are not boys but something else! In talking about Swamiji, Sri Thakur would say, ‘He is the male pigeon—the moment you catch hold of its beak, it will snatch it away. He is the fiery bullock—you cannot touch his tail. The moment you do so, he will start jumping about.’ But you all would simply lie prone, without making the slightest effort on your part. It is young men of the calibre of Swamiji that we want now.” If he but saw a spark of this manliness in any young man, he would be very happy and would again and again speak about it to others.

Apropos of this, I am reminded of a certain young man who had been interned for two years for involvement in anti-government

agitations. After being released he came to pay a visit to Varanasi. After seeing the other places of Varanasi, he came to the Ramakrishna Mission. Going to the revered Hari Maharaj, he went on talking about the ideal of Swamiji. In the course of this he said, "I am an admirer of Swamiji. We want to see Sannyasins, all-renouncing and full of vigour, like him." Then later on, in the course of his talk, he said, "But we have not the slightest regard for those who turn away from life in the world because of its troubles and anxieties. I call them cowards."

At this bold statement of the youth, the Swami was not in the least disturbed or hurt. Rather, he burst out laughing and said, "Right you are; but, then, your Swami too left the world more or less under circumstances you condemn. What have you got to say for that?" Hearing this, the boy was a little nonplussed, and after slowly saying a few more words, made prostrations to him and took his leave.

After the boy had gone, the Swami said, "It is boys like him that are needed. Just see, how he proclaimed us cowards to our very face. Swamiji liked boys such as he."

If some failings of the young Brahmacharins came to his notice, he would rebuke them severely for correcting them. Again, if he saw even a little of any good characteristic in them, he would say, "You are as good as gold, my dear boys. If Swamiji were living today, he would have danced keeping you on his head." Hari Maharaj, who had always been an austere Vedantin, spent his days to the last in Vedantic study and meditation. But while himself following this ideal, he also evinced great faith in the ideal of Karma Yoga as propounded by Swamiji, and encouraged the young Sannyasins of the Order to follow that ideal. He would say about them, "These are the ones who are working in the right way. The others are simply wasting their time in mere frivolities."

But he would keep a strict eye over these youngsters, so that they learned to work with faith and a correct attitude of mind, as required by the ideal of Karma Yoga. If per-chance he found the slightest trace of 'ego' in them, he would draw their attention to it, saying, "Do you think that by these works of yours, you have done something unique? What

you are doing, I can get done by scavengers for a pay of Rs. 15 a month. And as for those of you who are working in the office, better workers than you can be obtained by spending Rs. 20 to Rs. 25 a month. So is there anything to be vain about what your are doing?"

Such criticisms of his did not, however, represent his actual way of thought. They were calculated to cut at the root of vanity in these young men. This was proved to us from the following incident. A certain renowned Pundit of Varanasi, who happened to hear such a reprimand of Hari Maharaj, said to a Sannysasin, "What Maharaj said is absolutely correct. Qualified as you are, how much more could you have done, if you had remained in the world! Instead of that, in what petty works you are spending your days!" When this was narrated to the revered Hari Maharaj, he became very much agitated and said, "How can he understand the meaning of my words? No doubt he is a Pundit, but all the same, he is a worldly man. Note what Sri Thakur used to say, 'If one eats radish, one belches radish.' His case too is like that. After spending all his life in pursuit of self-interest, how can he now understand the true meaning of selfless work ? My meaning was entirely different when I said so. What I want is that all of you should do your works of 'service' in a selfless way, entirely devoid of any 'ego'. That alone will lead you to the highest goal." If he saw in any one the slightest trace of the vanity of holiness or of Tapasya, he would sarcastically remark, "What had you been doing in the Shrine Room ? Did you count your beads or simply 'make a paste of bananas' (spend your time uselessly) ?" In other words if one practises Japa and meditation with real earnestness, such vanity will never come.

By the time I came to the Swami, the attitude of spending all his time in austerity had passed in him, and he had firmly moulded his life according to the spirit of the Vedanta. Every word or action of his brought out the fact that the pure Atman is completely separate from the body, mind and intellect. His body was infirm—he could walk only with great difficulty. Even then he was always busy with spiritual talks and with doing good to others. His one thought was always how to inculcate in us a little spiritual consciousness. We, who were steeped in

body consciousness, could never consider the body as unreal, and had no doubt in our minds that when the body was feeling pleasure and pain, it was we who were doing so. But even during that severe ailment of his, how many times have we not seen him swaying his head and saying, “Let the pain know and the body know, but you, oh my mind, remain for ever in bliss!” This chant of his might appear to be just mere words. But when we saw him enjoying like a child the sight of a wound in the palm of his own hand—the wound which had been caused by the removal of a tumour on his palm—being cleaned with a probe by the renowned surgeon Dr. Suresh Bhattacharya, both we and the doctor were filled with wonder. How a man can be so much devoid of body-consciousness, was beyond our understanding.

An incident of another day. By hearing the instructions given by the revered Maharaj, a little feeling of renunciation had grown in my mind. ‘That the world is without any substance’, was coming out of my lips now and then and was also the subject of my thoughts sometimes. It was at such a time that I said about a boy, “Maharaj, he has a great attraction for the world.” What I then understood as the meaning of the word ‘world’, was one’s own relations and one’s movable and immovable properties. It had never crossed my mind that the word could have any wider meaning. Hearing this bold statement of mine, the revered Hari Maharaj simply said, “Right you are. But please know that one’s own body too is included in one’s ‘world’.” This statement of his was a bolt from the blue. That this body—whose thought was always before my mind, about whose health the Maharaj was asking me everyday—that this very body could be a source of bondage in any way, I had never thought before. Seeing my condition, the Maharaj said again, “Well, Su.. what do you say ? Is it not so?” At this, my head bent down and I said, “Yes, Maharaj. Please bless me that I realise this in my life.”

Established in the Vedantic ideal, he always tried to infuse in us the high truths of it in simple easy ways. He used to say, “We are verily the Brahman itself in its entirety. Still see how small we are, considering ourselves to be under the influence of Maya!” About this he used to tell

us the following story: “When he was wandering about as an itinerant monk, Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) saw on the wall of a dilapidated temple a couplet written in Hindi with charcoal. Nobody knew who had written this couplet or where the writer had got it from. But how beautiful its meaning was! It is as follows: ‘Oh desire! you are the lowliest of lowly. You are like the tanner or the scavenger. This Atman of mine was the Brahman itself—but coming near you, how small you have converted it into!’ ”

Sometimes, swaying his head in rhythm with it, he would sing a Bengali song, which translated into English would read—“The silkworm spins its own cocoon, which it can cut through if it wants. But under the clutches of the great Maya, it is never able to do so.” He would say, “Such indeed is Maya. To explain this Maya, Sri Thakur used to hide his face behind a towel and then say, ‘Just see, how near I am to you but because this towel has come in between us, you are not able to see me.’”

After saying all these, the Maharaj would sometimes sing a Bengali song which, translated into English, would read:

Such is the great power of Maya,  
How it has spread its magic!  
Even Brahma and Vishnu have lost their consciousness !  
How can a mere Jiva understand it ?

Again he would sometimes say, “Sri Thakur would show a few small earthen pots and say, ‘Just fill these pots with the same water and put on them different numbers like 1,2,3, etc. You will find that after some time you will think that there are different waters inside the different pots. But it is not so really. If you break the pots, you will find the same water in all of them! Those pots are the different attributes. Unless these attributes are removed, one cannot attain the realisation of one’s own true nature.”

Sometimes he would say, “It can be realised through Sadhan and Bhajan (spiritual practices).” Again at some other times, he would say, “But do you know what Sadhan and Bhajan really are? They simply help



to make the wings get tired. What a beautiful illustration! Sri Thakur used to speak about 'the bird on the mast of a ship' When the ship moves far into the ocean, the bird on the mast flies by turns as far as it could go to the north, south, east and west, in search of its nest, but failing to find it every time, settles down at last on the mast itself. Exactly like that, after practising Sadhan and Bhajan to the best of one's ability, one finds at last that there is no refuge other than His grace. Again, there is no other way to realise this fact except through proper Sadhan and Bhajan." Seeing the unique fusion of both knowledge and devotion in this staunch follower of the path of knowledge, we would feel charmed. A certain very austere Sadhaka named Sadhu Shantinath used to come often to the revered Hari Maharaj. He was then a Mauni (practising absolute silence). Even in the winter of Varanasi, he would not have with him any other cloth except a Kaupina (loin cloth) and a blanket. One day the revered Achalanandaji was describing before us to the reverd Hari Maharaj, the great austerities that Sadhu Shantinath had been practising. In this connection, he said, "Maharaj, once I and Shantinath used to be in adjacent Kutias (huts) in Hrishikesh. I saw a cobra going across his chest, and still his meditation did not break. How hard he practised these austerities all his life." But the revered Hari Maharaj understood the real import of such austerities. That was why, when 'Mauni' Shantinath was making prostrations to him with great devotion one day, he said to him very lovingly, "Well, Shantinath, how much you have done! Now take refuge in the Divine Mother. Nothing can be achieved without Her grace." I do not know if Shantinath accepted this attitude.

At this time, the revered Hari Maharaj would often sing a Bengali song, whose purport is:

Whom else shall I call, Oh Shyama!

A child can call its mother alone!

I am not that type of a son, Mother,

Who will address as 'Mother' any one else.

If the mother per-chance beats the child, even then the latter goes on crying 'mother, mother'. If it is pushed away, the child puts its arms

round the neck of the mother and does not leave her, however much she may scold it.

I have heard that in 1922, when he was leaving his body in full consciousness in sacred Varanasi, he had uttered with folded hands, “*Satyam Jnanam Anantam Brahma*” (Brahman is Truth, Consciousness and Infinity), and at the very last, “*Brahma saytam, Jagat say tarn, Jagat Brahme pratishtitam*” (Brahman is Truth, the Jagat (world) is Truth, the Jagat is established in Brahman).” With these words he gave up the body. About this last utterance of his, there had taken place much discussion amongst the erudite Sadhus of both the Ashramas of Varanasi, because of its apparent conflict with the usually accepted Advaitic stand-point. Revered Jagadanandaji Maharaj, as he was teaching us Chhandogya Upanishad, said to us one day referring to this question, “Listen, I too had joined in the discussion and had said, how could one who had all along maintained that Brahman is true and the Jagat (world) false, say at the last moment ‘Brahman is true, and Jagat is true’ ? Most probably those who had heard him then, could not catch the words properly. But now when I am reading in the Chhandogya Upanishad ‘*Sarvam khalvidam Brahma*’ (all this is Brahman) and trying to get at its real meaning, I find that here is being explained the meaning of that last utterance of revered Hari Maharaj. It is truly the state of the ‘Vijnani’. As Sri Thakur used to say, ‘The follower of the path of knowledge says—‘not this,’ not this,’ that is, He is not the mind, He is not the intellect, He is not the ego’—and at last arrives at the Atman, the goal. Then he finds that he is not only the Brahman without any distinction but it is He who has become this Jiva and the world as also the twenty-five cosmic principles. This is the state of the Vijnani and not of the Jnani. It is like one climbing up to the roof. As one climbs, one thinks that the floor, the stairs, etc., are different from the roof. Discarding thus one by one, saying ‘this is not the roof, that is not the roof’, one at last reaches the roof—and when one has got upon it, one sees that what has gone into the making of the roof, has gone into the making of the steps too. Such is the state of the Vijnani. He sees Him alone everywhere’ “

Thus we have been blessed by getting the Darshan of a 'full knower of Brahman', a true 'Vijnani'.

## CHAPTER III

## SWAMI BRAHMANANDA (1863-1922)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: If Swami Vivekananda was the active Apostle and the authentic voice of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Brahmananda or Rakhal Maharaj was the “spiritual son” of the Great Master, as he himself realised in a mystic vision. Swami Vivekananda described him as a ‘Himalaya of Spirituality’, and called him the ‘Raja’<sup>1</sup> of the monastic Brotherhood he founded. This title he gave him in recognition of his profound wisdom, deep insight into the heart of complicated issues, and his silent, unobtrusive, but unfailing leadership. In 1902, Swamiji made him the first President of the Math and the Mission he founded. Swamiji’s estimate of him was justified by the part he played in piloting the ship of this infant monastic organisation through the troubled waters of social and political tensions that prevailed in those days. The secret of his success lay in his spiritual stature before which all man-made obstacles were dissipated into nothing. Peace reigned in his presence and prosperity also followed him. He spoke little, but his silence conveyed more meaning than mighty orations. His life and conversations dealing with lofty spiritual themes are available today in a volume entitled the *Eternal Companion*. He passed away in 1922.

Of the great direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, the very first one I had the privilege of contacting was Swami Brahmananda, recognised as one of the noted companions of the Great Master in his divine play on earth. He was also known in the Monastic Order and among the devotees as Raja Maharaj or simply as Maharaj-ji. I do not exactly remember when I met him for the first time. Nevertheless, I remember it clearly that one day with a friend of mine, I crossed the Ganges at Baranagar and went to the Math. It happened most probably in 1914 or 1915.

We had heard that one should take some fruits when one goes to have a Darshan (meeting) of a Sannyasin. Accordingly we had bought a couple of green coconuts just for four pice to take with us to the Math. As we left the boat and climbed up the flight of steps at the bank, we saw a Sadhu sitting on a bench in the verandah facing the Ganges, with a few young Sadhus standing near him. Somehow, it dawned on my mind that he must be Swami Brahmanandaji. Accordingly, the two of us bowed down to make Pranam (prostration) to him placing the two coconuts at his feet. The moment our prostration was finished, he said to one of the Sannyasins, “Go and ask them to offer these two coconuts to Thakur for ‘Bhoga.’” This filled us with great surprise; because so far, whenever we had taken some fruits or sweets to any Sannyasin at the

Math, he would at once ask us if those were meant for Thakur or not. Anything that was meant for another would never be offered to Thakur. This time, seeing this rule broken, we were naturally surprised. It was later that we understood that Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna and his 'spiritual son,' Swami Brahmanandaji, were in reality the same entity.

Another behaviour of Sri Maharaj-ji made me wonder more. He started asking my young companion his name, place of residence and other particulars. But though I was standing next to him, he never turned his eyes on me even once. Then all of a sudden he looked at me and said, "I Know you very well." Having said this, he continued his conversation with my friend. I was speechless! For, was it not the first time that I was meeting him? It was only after I had joined the Math, that I came to know that this was his way with those fortunate few whom he meant to grace with initiation afterwards.

For the next two or three years, I did not have any occasion to meet him. In the month of September October 1917, I came to Varanasi for a change of climate. There, one day, I happened to meet two persons—one a former acquaintance and the other a classmate (later known respectively as Swami Akhilananda and Swami Vishwananda) at the Dasaswamedh Ghat. Although I had been staying very near the temples of Sri Vishwanath and Sri Annapurna, I had not gone even once to worship at their Shrines. But my friends, especially Nirode, would not leave me alone. Ultimately one day he brought me to the presence of revered Hari Maharaj (Swami Turiyananda). I was charmed by his sublime appearance and sympathetic words. Quite unknown to me, my sleeping religious inclination started waking up. So far, I was of the view that politics should be the sole concern of a patriotic young man, and religion was useful at best only as a steadying influence in public life.

About religion, I was then completely ignorant and was a sceptic. From a study of Western philosophy, a firm conviction had grown in me that God can never be seen, or realised in any way. He is only an object of argumentation and a mere assumption accepted on faith. But if one

thinks about Him, there may grow in one's mind some resultant powers—that was all.

It was in such a wavering state of mind, that I met revered Hari Maharaj at Varanasi (see details in the Chapter entitled Swami Turiyananda). Through his supernatural divine powers, the doubts of my mind got dispelled. Gradually the idea dawned in my mind that God was not an object of argumentation alone, but that it was indeed possible for one to attain Him by the right type of 'Sadhan and Bhajan' (spiritual practice), and the grace of the 'God-Guru'. One day I expressed these ideas to the revered Hari Maharaj and entreated him to help me proceed along this path by giving me initiation. At this he became grave, and with a benign smile playing on his lips, he shook his head and said, "We do not give initiation to anybody." I just sat there sad and stunned. Seeing my condition, he was filled with compassion and said immediately, "We shall send you to a personage who is far above us all in spirituality."

Several months passed. The desire to continue my education—for I was then a student of the Calcutta University—completely left me. Even then, at the behest of Sri Hari Maharaj I returned to Calcutta to complete my education. After settling down in Calcutta, I went one day in accordance with the advice of Sri Hari Maharaj to 'Balaram Mandir' to meet Sri Maharaj-ji. I found Sri Maharaj-ji sitting on a small wooden bedstead in a small room by the side of the stairs leading to the first floor. Before him were sitting a few devotees. After making prostration to Maharaj-ji. I also sat beside them. The first World War was then on. I was surprised to find that here too they were talking about the war. One amongst the devotees had taken the side of the Germans and another that of the English, and a hot discussion was going on, each maintaining that his side would win. It seemed that Sri Maharaj-ji was enjoying it all very much. He was having his smoke from the 'Gar Gara' (a type of hubble-bubble) and was joining in the discussion with a sweet smile on his face, sometimes taking one side and sometimes the other. Seeing all this, I was speechless! Dumbfounded, I asked myself whom had I come to see! He too was busy with politics just like any of us! How could he

be more advanced than the revered Turiyanandaji Maharaj ? This and such other thoughts assailed my mind. But after a few minutes, I found that the whole atmosphere had completely changed. Sri Maharaj-ji had become very grave. The devotees stopped the talk and took their leave of him, making prostration to him with great reverence. I also prostrated myself before him and was about to speak to him about myself, when he suddenly got up and started pacing to and fro in a grave mood, in the narrow verandah facing the road. His mood and deportment had completely changed. Try as I would, I could not go near him—a vague sense of fear and wonder had completely taken possession of me. Sometime passed this way. Then perhaps to bless me, he suddenly came to a halt in front of me near the door. In a mood of awestruck elation, I bowed down to him and with a faltering voice said, “Maharaj-ji, the revered Hari Maharaj has sent me to you.” Nothing further could I utter. Sri Maharaj-ji affectionately looked at me and said these few words: “My dear child, God alone is the reality.” I do not know in what sense he said this. Nevertheless, I returned with my heart filled with a great bliss!

After all, I could not continue with my studies. Through the grace of Sri Mahapurush Maharaj I joined the Math after a few months. At that time a few other young men of my age also joined the Math. We all started growing under the great love and affection of Sri Mahapurush Maharaj. Revered Sarat Maharaj (Swami Saradanandaji) used to come to the Math from Udbodhan now and then. Revered Abhedanandaji had also returned to the Math after his long sojourn of twenty-five years in America. The Math was then surcharged with the divine vibrations emanating from them. The idea struck our minds that we really stood in need of nothing more for the advancement of our spiritual life. We started making our best efforts to advance in the divine path by keeping them as our ideals. It was at this time that a Sannyasin came in an agitated state and said to us, “Have you heard that Maharaj-ji is coming? Now you will be getting an opportunity to meet the greatest luminary of the math.” We could not then understand what he meant by this statement of his. Before this, I had already seen Maharajji on two occasions. So I could not understand what novelty we could expect in



him. But after a few days we found that Sannyasins and devotees from various quarters were collecting at the Math. Every one of them had the same words on his lips, 'Maharaj-ji is coming! Maharaj-ji is coming!' God alone knew of what great treasure they were to get an inkling from him!

At last Sri Maharaj-ji arrived. I actually experienced that the very atmosphere of the Math had changed completely! Before this it was 'heavenly', but now it was filled with a divine atmosphere, much more intense. Every one of them there, was waiting with great eagerness for the moment when he would have a sight of Maharaj-ji or could hear a few words dropping from his lips. It was not only the Sannyasins and the devotees, but learned people from other walks of life—artists, men of letters and others—were also collecting at the Math. We, the new Brahmacharins, could not get at the real import of all this.

We used to see at this time that Maharaj-ji would leave his bed very early in the morning, finish his ablutions and then sit on a easy chair in the verandah of the first floor of the Math, facing the Ganges. We, the new Brahmacharins, would gather there before him and sit in two rows and begin to practice Japa and Dhyana. He would not say anything to anybody. Yet, because of his presence alone, we found our meditations getting deep.

Most of the time he would keep sitting on the easy chair quietly with an aimless look in his eyes. Some times for our good, he would walk to and fro between our two rows, chanting the name of Sri Thakur. When Maharaj would be sitting on the easy chair, we found him always in a divine mood. His eyes would then be aimless like those of the bird sitting on her eggs, as in the Master's parable. He would be completely oblivious of his surroundings. He alone knew what he was seeing or listening to at that time. A 'gargara' (a type of hubblebubble) would be kept near him. The attendant would prepare the smoke in the 'kalika' (a bowl to hold the tobacco) and place it quietly on the stem of the 'gargara'. Sri Maharaj-ji would just draw the smoke once or twice only! We have read in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* that the look in the eyes of a Yogi is aimless and steady like that of a hen sitting on her eggs. I do

not know to what extent this idea would be intelligible to those who have not seen Maharaj-ji under such a condition. But it is our good fortune that we had this opportunity of actually seeing it. Again, if perchance, the glance of those heavenly eyes was turned towards one, one's heart would be filled to the brim with bliss. Nobody would be able to explain why it was so. But I have heard from the lips of one or two of such fortunate individuals, that if that glance was turned towards one even once one would be merged in bliss for at least a day; and if perchance, Maharaj-ji touched somebody, then waves of divine bliss would inundate him for at least three days.

A long time would pass this way. After the sun rose up in the sky, first the brother disciples of Sri Maharaj and then the other senior Sadhus of the Math would come, after finishing their Japa and meditation, to Sri Maharaj-ji, to offer their salutations to him. We would witness the revered Sarat Maharaj and Abhedanandaji Maharaj bowing down and touching the ground before Maharaj-ji uttering the words 'Suprabhat' (good morning). The revered Vijnan Maharaj would lay himself at full length on the ground at his feet. And the revered Mahapurush Maharaj, opening his fresh meditation-laden eyes, would say with folded hands, "Suprabhat, Maharaj-ji, suprabhat" again and again, offering salutations coming from the core of his heart. Maharaj-ji would answer the salutation of everybody with a 'Suprabhat' except in the case of Mahapurush Maharaj, to whom he would say, "Suprabhat Tarak-da, Suprabhat." This was perhaps because Mahapurush Maharaj was much senior to him in age.

After this, the other Sannyasins and devotees would make prostrations to him. He also would acknowledge these, speaking a word or two to one or cutting jokes with another. I could not fail to notice that the hearts of every one became filled to the brim with spiritual joy.

Afterwards we would depart to attend to our respective duties. Sri Maharaj-ji too, after taking a light breakfast, would come out for a walk in the spacious compound of the Math. I can never forget the picture that he presented then to an onlooker. I would see him moving with his face slightly tilted up and eyes fixed above. His attendant would be

following him very fast holding an umbrella over his head. I do not know why I felt that his frame had become taller, and that as he was walking, his feet were not touching the ground! Whenever I got the good fortune of seeing this form of his, I would just stare and stare!

At dusk, after the Aratrika (vespers,) we would again assemble near Sri Maharaj-ji. All the revered brotherdisciples of Maharaj-ji like Mahapurush Maharaj, Sarat Maharaj, Abhedanandaji Maharaj, and Vijnan Maharaj and senior Sannyasins like Sudhir Maharaj (Swami Suddhanandaji), Shukal Maharaj (Swami Atmanandaji) and other direct disciples of Swamiji and several others present at the Math, would all join us there near Sri Maharaj-ji. Some of the seniors would sit on chairs and some on the floor with us. After we all had kept quiet for some time, Sri Maharaj-ji would say to us, "Come, let us know what questions you have to ask. Or better, put the questions to 'Pesan' (Swami Vijnanananda or Vijnan Maharaj)." Often we could not think of any question. Then Maharaj-ji would himself ask Vijnan Maharaj some question on our behalf. We used to observe how Vijnan Maharaj, like a small boy telling his lessons before his teacher with fear in his heart, would give the answer slowly and hesitatingly. After that, the same question would be put to the other Swamis. They also would give the answer according to their own ways of thinking. The answer of each one of them would sound very nice to us and would shed a new light for us. But when at last Maharaj-ji would give his answer, we would feel that it was the final one, and that without this, the solution to the question would have remained incomplete.

On one such occasion Sri Maharaj-ji said, "Let the question from your side be 'what is the state of a person who has seen God?' " When the question went through the usual round, we got fine answers from each one of them. But when at last Maharaj-ji said, "Why don't you repeat that verse of the Mundakopanishad (II ii 8) '*Bhidyate hridaya-granthi. . . tasmin drste paravare*' Seeing Him, the knot of the heart is cut asunder, all doubts vanish, and the results of all actions are destroyed.' " Then the thought came to us that this was indeed the right answer; when one attains God, this is what becomes of that person.

Thus sitting at the feet of Sri Maharaj-ji every morning and evening our days were passing in great bliss, when one day a distressing event took place. Swami Suddhanandaji (Sudhir Maharaj) was then the Joint Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and the Mission. He used to attend to some works at Belur Math too.

He was very learned, humble and affectionate, and was also a great source of inspiration to us in all our activities. But we did not at first know why that evening, while we were listening to the nectar-like talk of Sri Maharaj-ji the Swami approached him suddenly with the Manager of the Math and another Sannyasin, and after making prostrations to Sri Maharaj-ji, said in a rather agitated voice, “Maharaj-ji, we have to make a certain request to you.” Sri Maharaj-ji was a person of deep insight, and so seeing his attitude, understood everything and said, “Well, Sudhir, please let us know what you have got to say.” At this he started saying, “Maharaj-ji, these boys are sitting near you, listening to your instructions. But they neglect the work allotted to them at the Math and do precious little. If this goes on any longer, it will be very difficult for us to carry on with the activities of the Math. So our request to you Maharaj-ji, is that you please permit us to ask those of them who shirk from performing their allotted duties, to leave the Math for good.” Sri Maharaj-ji did not utter a single word in reply. Suddhananda Maharaj continued, “Maharaj-ji, there is another request. When they are thus turned out, they should not be allowed to take refuge with you.” Sri Maharaj-ji could no longer maintain his silence. In a slightly agitated voice he said, “What is this that you are talking of, Sudhir? You have no other thought except work, work, work. Do you ever ask these boys how far they have advanced in that for which they have left their kith and kin and come here—for which they have left their all? Do you ever enquire how much of meditation and Japam they practice ? My observation is that practically they do nothing. Some of them join in the Aratrika (vespers) and some others do not do that even. It is for this very reason that I get them to sit with me. Instead of you all helping them by your past experiences of ‘Sadhan and Bhajan’, you talk of work and work alone always.” At this stage an elderly Sannyasin said in a sarcastic vein, “These boys already know everything. What more will

they learn from us?” Hearing this, Maharaj-ji said, “What is it that you are telling us, brother? How much do they really know? They have just left their kith and kin. If you people do not give them anything, wherefrom will they learn ? Just see, brother, in order to receive something, you have first to give something. Don’t you see how these youngsters are running to Varanasi to serve Haribhai (Turiyanandaji) ? And here—you and I are not getting even one attendant! The boys get something there, and that is why they are going there, and here, we are not able to give them anything.” Then turning towards Sudhir Maharaj, he said, “And Sudhir, you are asking our permission to turn them out. That, you may very well do. But my door will always be open for them. I will never be able to turn out anybody. You talk only about work. But I find that now we want a few such Sadhus as can engage themselves in Sadhan and Bhajan alone.”<sup>1</sup>

Hearing these words of Maharaj-ji, we were amazed. Realizing his limitless compassion and his great anxiety for our welfare, we were filled with overflowing wonder and joy.

Revered Mahapurush Maharaj used to love us more than a father does. One day he took a few of us novices to Maharaj-ji and said, “Maharaj-ji these boys have joined us recently. They want to have initiation from you. They are all good boys. They will consider themselves blessed, if you do initiate them.” But at that time Maharaj-ji did not utter a single word in reply. Later, on another occasion, when we were sitting near him, he suddenly said, “Do you, boys, want initiation? In that case you better ‘clear the jungle’. Learn to practise ‘*sama, dama, uparati, titiksha*’, etc—(control of senses, control of mind, introspection, forbearance, etc.) Then approach me for ‘Deeksha’ (initiation). What will be the use of sowing seeds in a jungle?”

But all the same, Maharaj-ji was very gracious to us this time and gave a few of us initiation into the state of Brahmacharya. When we went to make prostration to him the next day, he looked at us full of affection and said, “Look here, boys, Kali (Swami Abhedananda) was saying that you all have never gone out for Bhiksha (holy alms) like us.

You have never experienced that hard life of a Sannyasin. Now that you have become Brahmacharins, you better live on Bhiksha for three days. Don't you agree that it is a nice idea?" We could understand the tenderness of Maharaj-ji's heart and said, "Yes, Maharaj-ji, we shall live on Bhiksha for three days."

Srimat Abhedanandaji Maharaj had returned to India after twentyfive long years abroad. How much hardship they had gone through during the time they were practising 'Sadhan and Bhajan'! How many were the days when they had to undergo complete or partial fasting on account of the scarcity of Bhiksha! He used to tell us and the revered Maharaj-ji often about this, and to ask us why we too should not undergo hardships likewise. This subject would often be the topic of his talk with Sri Maharaj-ji. But that the make-up of our bodies and minds was not suited for such hardships, that the environment and atmosphere of the country had changed much in the mean time, he could never realise, having been absent from here for such a long time. The other old Sannyasins, however, understood all this and would rather forbid us from undergoing such hardships.

However that may be, we were just ready to go out for Bhiksha, when an attendant of Sri Maharaj-ji came to us and said, "Maharaj-ji is urgently calling you all, the new Brahmacharins."

When we presented ourselves before him, he told us with great affection, "You are going out for Bhiksha—is it not so?" We replied, "Yes Maharaj-ji." At this he became more tender and said, "Look here! Sujjee (Surya Maharaj or Swami Nirvananandaji, an attendant of Sri Maharaj-ji) has given these five rupees for your Bhiksha. With this money you better buy rice and other commodities from the market and under a tree of the Math, cook your meal and eat. That will serve the purpose of your having had Bhiksha." We could understand what was passing through Maharaj-ji's heart and accordingly bought the ingredients from the market with the money, prepared a meal, and partook of it. Revered Mahapurush Maharaj also came to us saying "The food obtained by Bhiksha is very holy", and asked for a little of it from us and ate it with relish. As far as I remember, our Bhiksha on the next two days also was

performed in a like manner. We did not have to go out for it even on a single day. It was thus, with the heart of a mother, that Sri Maharaj-ji used to train us.

No further initiation took place that year. The next year, that is in 1922, Sri Maharaj-ji had come to the Math for a few days, on his way to Varanasi. We had heard that the two centres at Varanasi were not having very harmonious relationship between them. It was to settle this affair that Swami Saradanandaji thought of taking Sri Maharaj-ji there.

In due course, Maharaj-ji started for Varanasi. We heard that, reaching that place, he never questioned anyone about the affairs of the centres, but just stayed there inundating the two Ashramas with his holy aura. Every morning and evening, and at other times too, if they were free, the Sannyasins and the Brahmacharins used to sit near him and enjoy his divine company and talks. All troubles and dissensions dissolved of their own accord. Those that were pure Karma Yogis there—some of them being even the disciples of Swami Vivekananda, who had decided never to take Sannyasa—came to him one by one and took Sannyasa. And those who had been considering Karma to be an impediment in the path of spiritual practice now understood the true import of Nishkama Karma or selfless action as propounded by Swamiji, and gradually dedicated themselves to that ideal. Through the divine inspiration of Sri Maharaj-ji, not only our two Ashramas but the whole of Varanasi too got submerged in bliss. When a Sannyasin of the Kashi Advaita Ashrama wrote a letter, describing all this to a brother disciple at the Math, the latter, filled with immense joy, came to the revered Mahapurush Maharaj and narrated to him its contents. We saw the revered Mahapurush Maharaj taking the letter from the Sannyasin and again and again touching it to his own forehead in salutation and saying, “Shouldn’t it be so? Shouldn’t it be so ? What wonder is there that such a thing happens in the presence of a personage like Sri Maharaj-ji who is always in communion with the Supreme Being and whose company fills the hearts of all with bliss. Just write back, saying that nobody should miss the holy company of Sri Maharaj-ji. Ask them to enjoy it to their hearts’ content.”

We were speechless at what we saw and heard. The understanding came to us that these great men alone could understand and appreciate the worth of each other.

In due course, Sri Maharaj-ji returned to the Math after filling Varanasi to the brim with bliss. This time he was very liberal in bestowing his grace on aspirants. He called out to Sri Mahapurush Maharaj, “Tarak-da, this time I have decided to give these (showing us) initiation. But should I do it free of charge? Every one of them must offer a Dakshina of Rs. 101. What do you say?” Mahapurush Maharaj understood the joke of Sri Maharaj-ji. So he also said, nodding his head, “That is all right, why should you give it to them free ? Let them each collect Rs. 101.” It was known to both of them as well as to us, that it was impossible for any of us to collect this amount then.

On the appointed day, we got our initiation. At the end of the initiation ceremony we made prostrations to Maharaj-ji, not with an offering of Rs. 101, but with some fruits and flowers, which he himself put in our hands. We were filled with bliss. By his affectionate look and divine touch, our hearts were filled to the brim. It never crossed our minds then that this joy was the forerunner of an approaching sorrow. Sri Maharaj-ji was now “breaking the pot publicly in the market place.” Without the least hesitation, he was making our lives blessed by giving to us the last drop of his affection.

A few days after this, I had to go to my ancestral home for some personal work. One day as I was sitting there all by myself, the face of Sri Maharaj-ji floated before my mind’s eye. The thought came to me that he was my very own, the one dearest to me, my Guru, my Ishtam, and my only guide in life. Most probably it was the day following this, that I received a letter from a friend of mine at the Math, telling me, “Maharaj-ji has an attack of cholera. Come at once.” Immediately I started back reaching the Math the next day. I found that the whole Math was in deep silence—as if every one there was anticipating some great evil to fall on them. Maharaj-ji was sick at Balaram Mandir in Bagbazar, and Sannyasins were flocking there to see him and to serve him. We also had the privilege to be in that group. A day or two after, I



heard that on the previous night he had called the Sadhus assembled there to him, blessed them, and again and again told them in divine ecstasy that he was indeed the same cowherd boy whom Sri Thakur had seen with his divine eyes, sporting with Sri Krishna at Vraja. The other Swamis understood, and so did we, that now the day had come for him to end his divine play on earth. Two days after this, on the 10th April, 1922, he brought to a close that play and attained to his original state.

A few days after, some of us young Sannyasins were sitting together, when one of us said, "My dear brothers, Maharaj-ji has now gone away. But I had always the feeling that he loved me the most of all." Whereupon another suggested, "My friend, I, too, had the impression that he loved me the most." A third one also made a similar statement. Then a Sannyasin, much senior to us in years, said, "You see, Maharaj-ji's affection was like the unfathomable ocean. It was by sprinkling a drop or two of this water, that he used to satisfy us. And each one of us thought that perhaps he had received the whole ocean—though actually nothing had happened to the ocean. It had remained the same as ever!" Such was his pure, all-beneficent, unending, unique love!

Many years after this, we had gone to Kankhal (Hardwar). There, the founder of the Ashrama, the revered Kalyan Maharaj asked those of us who had seen Sri Maharaj-ji, to speak something about him on the day of his birthday anniversary. In the course of conversation when the topic of Varanasi and others was raised, I said laughingly, "Maharaj-ji was very clever." At this Kalyan Maharaj was very much annoyed and said, "How much of him have you seen, young mart, to say he was clever! Swamiji was like the very sun. None of us could go near him. And Maharaj-ji was like the moon. All of us would feel satisfied by his cooling light. We used to obey him not only because he was the President but because each one of us knew that whatever he was asking of us was really for our good. That was why we used to obey him without a murmur—not merely because he was intelligent or clever." Hearing these words of his, we were charmed to the very core of our heart. We understood that this was the real estimate of Sri Maharaj-ji.

I do not think it will be out of place if I write here something about the way Sri Maharaj-ji's love would find expression. It was completely different from the usual way. We have seen that he would totally ignore one whom he actually loved very much. Perhaps day after day he had been sitting along with others in front of him. He would be talking with the others, or perhaps joking with them in various ways, and still would not turn even once towards the one he loved much. Then all of a sudden he would turn his nectar-shedding gaze towards him, and his heart would be filled to the very brim with bliss. And the aroma of this bliss would be with him throughout the whole day. And, if perchance he showed his grace by touching him once, then that joy would fill his heart for at least the next three days! This is no myth or exaggeration. We have heard about this directly from the recipients. We too had the good fortune to have a taste of it to some extent ourselves. Such was the unique love, getting an iota of which we have become blessed.

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1. This was the designation given to him by Swami Vivekananda in recognition of his capacity to lead the Monastic Order.
1. To avoid misunderstanding of the Swami's view on this question, it has to be stated that his idea was to stress Swami Vivekananda's ideal of maintaining a proper balance between work and meditation. When undue stress is laid on one of these to the exclusion of the other, it has to be corrected by pointing out the importance of the neglected discipline. That is what the Swami is doing here. There were other occasions on which he stressed the importance of work too. For a full understanding of his views on this question, the reader may refer to his conversations recorded in the *Eternal Companion*.

## CHAPTER IV

## SWAMI SIVANANDA (1814-1934)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Tarak, as Swami Sivananda was known in his pre-monastic days, joined the circle of the Great Master's disciples in 1880. He practised meditation under the direction of the Great Master and had lofty spiritual realisations, in praise of which Swami Vivekananda called him a Mahapurush or a high-souled personage. He subsequently came to be known among the followers of the Great Master as Mahapurush Maharaj. Though given to a life of contemplation, austerity and holy wanderings in the early part of his life, he settled down after Swami Vivekananda's return from the West to a life devoted to service and the nurturing of the infant monastic Brotherhood. Like the three Swamis dealt with in the earlier chapters, he too was one of those who contributed much to the building up of the monastic traditions of the Order and in forging the spirit of Brotherhood among them. He did some work of preaching in Ceylon and later founded the Advaita Ashram at Varanasi. In 1910 he was made the Vice-President of the Math and the Mission, and from 1917 he had also to do the onerous duty of conducting the affairs of the Belur Math as its Manager. In 1922, he became the President after Swami Brahmananda passed away. As the President he travelled extensively all over India several times, thus drawing large numbers of lay followers to the Math and thus making the holy spiritual efficiency generated by Sri Ramakrishna available to a very wide public. There are two books on him available, one on his life and the other recording his conversations. He passed away in 1934.

Revered Swami Sivananda, known popularly among devotees as Sri Mahapurush Maharaj, is one of those, under whose loving care my life as a Sannyasin took shape. When I first entered the Ramakrishna Math, my knowledge about that monastic Brotherhood was very meagre. If I had not then received the unlimited love and care of Sri Mahapurush Maharaj, it is doubtful if I would have been able to stay on in the Math. It was most probably in the year 1919 that I came to Calcutta from Varanasi to complete my education at the behest of the revered Hari Maharaj (Swami Turiyananda). But my education could not be completed. When I was trying to concentrate my mind on studies, it happened that one day I came to the Math. Even before this I had been introduced to the revered Mahapurush Maharaj. Hearing then that I lived in Varanasi and was in the habit of visiting the revered Hari Maharaj, Mahapurushji had lovingly asked me a few questions. After that, I had met him at the Math a couple of times or so, and I had also told him about my preparing for the examination again. At that time, I had become acquainted with a certain Brahmachari of the Math. I had narrated to him the condition of my mind beforehand. After the examination, on a day that coincided with the birth anniversary of the

revered Premanandaji Maharaj, I arrived at the Math a little before dusk. By that time, the celebrations were almost over. Seeing me, the Brahmachariji said with great enthusiasm, "Ah! You have come here on a very good day. Come, let me take you to the revered Mahapurush Maharaj." I don't know if the Brahmachari had already told him something about me; but the moment I stood up after making prostration to him, Mahapurushji cast a loving glance on me and asked, "Then what have you decided to do ?" I still remember that question of his very well. Quite unexpectedly, the answer that suddenly came out of my lips was, "If you deign to keep me under your care, I would like to stay here." For the life of me I cannot understand even now how this answer came out of me; for, I was not at all prepared then for this course. In his reply Mahapurush Maharaj surprised me even more when he said, "Come on, come on, then. It is for young men like you that Swamiji brought into being these Maths." Filled with great joy, I asked him, "When should I come ?" He answered, "Whenever you like—you may come even tomorrow." Then swaying his head and with a sweet smile playing on his lips, he said, "But, then, you should take into account 'Magha' (the tenth lunar asterism), 'Aslesha' (the ninth constellation containing five stars, considered inauspicious for commencing a journey), 'the inauspicious part of Thursday', etc., while doing so. You must be aware that Sri Thakur used to observe these." He had most probably made this last remark thinking that we, the so-called English-educated youngsters, did not observe these. However that maybe, I came to the Math the very next day. It had never crossed my mind that I had to inform some other responsible persons of the Math about it. So, finding me at the Math after dusk, quite a number of the inmates started asking me various questions. Although I was not feeling like answering them all, still I did so. That was my first night at the Math. Unused as I was to a bed without a pillow, I had no sleep that winter night. When I made my Pranam to the revered Mahapurush Maharaj the next morning, the very first question that he asked me was, if I had any sleep last night. Hesitatingly I narrated to him everything. He became Very sorry and asked the Manager of the Math to be more careful about such matters.

I started my life at the Math in great joy. I think revered Mahapurush Maharaj had understood the great turmoil that was raging in my mind. It was his habit to have a walk every morning. One day, he told me suddenly, "Come, have a walk with me today. Let me hear everything about you." As we were walking about, he asked me about the condition of my mind then. I told him, "Maharaj, sometimes it occurs to my mind that I should take the examination, pass in it with great credit, and then join the Mission. At other times I feel I should stay on here without caring for the examination." No sooner had he heard this than he said, "Well, under the circumstances, it is better for you to take the examination first. You know Sri Thakur used to say that the beetle which feeds on cowdung, moves about with a little of cowdung sticking to its face. Perhaps it is passing through the garden containing many scented flowers, but just because of that little cowdung, it knows no scent. So, if you have such a desire, you better satisfy it first, and then come and join us." But the very next day I told him, "Please, Maharaj, that desire of mine has completely left me. Be gracious to keep me here at the Math."

From then onwards I remained in the Math. I had joined there to become a Sadhu, taking with me so many "*Samskaras*" —or impressions and ways of thought acquired from past experiences. So, from time to time these tendencies would just raise their heads. For example, I used to see the monastics residing at the Math serving Sri Thakur in various ways. I at first thought that in doing so, they were simply wasting their time—they should have been spending it in '*Japam*' and meditation only. I don't know if Mahapurushji divined my difficulty. It looks he did. For, one day when I was having a walk with him, we came across a few monastics watering the vegetable garden of the Math. Pointing at them he said to me, "Just see how nicely they are serving Sri Thakur." Before this I had some occasion to serve the country and the people. Compared to that, what the monastics were doing here, appeared to be very trifling to me. So I answered "Yes, Maharaj, but it looks like the play of children. Such work we have done before." He understood me and said, "Yes, you are right. But what they are doing now, is Sri Thakur's work." I did not understand even then, that what was being done here was a part of the

service to Thakur, and what we had done before was guided by our 'ego'. It was most probably to make me understand this, that the revered Maharaj had drawn my attention to it.

It was a fact that I considered myself blessed in having the divine company of revered Mahapurush Maharaj every morning and evening. It was during this period that he would meditate for two long hours every day inside the old temple of the Math. We also would try to do so sitting in the outside verandah. He would appreciate this little effort of ours and would encourage us saying, "Go on, practise as best as you can." After such meditation he would sit either in his own room or on the bench on the western verandah, in an indrawn mood. We would then approach him one by one and make prostrations to him. In a calm serene voice he would accost us saying, "How are you?" These few and loving words of his would fill our minds with bliss and assure us that all our doubts would soon melt away by the grace of great souls like him.

After I had thus spent two years and a half continuously at the Math, I was sent as a worker to the other centres of the Mission like Dacca, Barisal, etc., by the Math authorities. Although my mind did not like to leave the company of revered Mahapurush Maharaj and others, and go to a far off place, still I submitted myself to it, as it was an order from these great men themselves. Before leaving the Math, I told Mahapurush Maharaj after making prostrations to him, "Maharaj, I am going far away from you—please keep me in your mind." No sooner had he heard this, than he said, "Oh, you are going away! Where are you going? But wherever you go, He is always there—it is to His Math that you will be going. Where then is the distance or separation?"

On another occasion, when I was going away, I had told him, "Maharaj, please bless me." As soon as he heard this, Mahapurushji said, "Oh, you are talking about our blessings! Well, remember, no word of condemnation ever crosses these lips. Whatever we ever told you, even if it was rebuke, remember that it was nothing but blessing." When I was coming to Calcutta from Vara-, nasi, I had heard such a remark from revered Hari Maharaj too.

Once Mahapurush Maharaj was lying ill at Madhupuri, in the garden house of the late Purna Seth. There I expressed to him one day my feeling of wretchedness in life. "Maharaj, spiritual practices are producing no results in me," I said. He was then resting a little after his noonday meal. But as soon as he heard my words, he got up and said, "Listen, when a small boy gets cured of his fever, he says to his mother, 'Mother, give me a full plate of rice. I 'feel like finishing it all.' " But the mother knows how much will agree with him and so she serves him a little only. Later on when he is able to digest more she gives him more. Your case also is similar to that. He will give you everything at the right time."

I have had the good fortune of hearing such words of encouragement from him more than once. One day he was sitting in his room reading with great attention the work of the Western philosopher Spinoza, when he cried out all of a sudden to himself, "Oh, how nicely he has put it!" At that time I had been standing on one side of the room, having entered it quietly, without disturbing him at his study. Finding me near him, he said, Have you read this book?" Having read it while at college, I replied, "Yes, Maharaj, I have read it." At this he said, "What a wonderful writing! About God he says, 'To define Him is to limit Him; to determine Him is to negate Him; of Him we can only say that He is.' Again, immediately after saying 'He is,' he writes, 'It is better to say that It is.' He has thus tried to express that He is without sex. It is just like our 'Om Tat Sat'. The Supreme Being has been indicated by 'That' and not by 'He' or 'She'. Spinoza's idea is almost like that." At this I said "Maharaj, I do not understand anything about His being of the nature of Sat. But I get some joy while meditating. I think He is of the nature of Ananda!" He at once answered. "Right you are. But, my dear child, when you get a real taste of Him through His grace, you will see that He is beyond both joy and sorrow."

Non-attachment was characteristic of him in all his behaviour, and so he looked like one unconcerned with anything. Although his exterior was covered with a hard armour, his heart was very tender. I have already narrated about his love and kindness. Once I had come to the



Math from Dacca. At that time, for various reasons, I had become very thin. Revered Mahapurush Maharaj was sitting on a bench in the western verandah. Seeing me from that distance barebodied, he called out, "Ah! Su—seems to have become a great wrestler!" as if life at Dacca had made me very healthy and strong! He said this of course jokingly. So in the same vein I replied, "Indeed, Maharaj ! By the way, is your health all right ?" This caused this man of realisation to dive into himself. He said, "You are asking about the condition of my body. Well, through His grace, it has taken the impression of the mould in which it was put. Do you understand? The impression is complete!" He just repeated it again in his simple way. We were all speechless! I have never heard him telling about himself like this.

I have quite often seen him oblivious of his body and its concerns. When he was very ill, and the doctor came and asked him how he was, the first words that we would hear as an answer were, "I am alright"; even if he might have been suffering very much from breathing trouble. The doctor (Ajit Roy Chowdhary) knew his attitude very well. So he would say, "Yes, Maharaj, we know that you are very well. But then, I am asking you about the condition of the body." Then this great soul, ever lost in the Self, would ask his monastic attendant standing nearby, "Please tell him how I am now, and how I was yesterday." The attendant too would answer as if cajoling a small child "He is alright—had good sleep last night", and so on. He would then repeat the same statements after the attendant, "Yes, I am alright now—last night i slept well," etc. Perhaps his attendant would be telling about the real state of his health to the doctor afterwards. If an ordinary person asked him about his health, his answer would be, "Quite well, just see, this body will have to follow the natural six changes—namely, be born, exist, grow, be transformed, get worn out, and die. So, what is the sense in worrying about it?"

When we joined the Math, he had just returned after practising great austerities at Varanasi, the Himalayas and other places. Every action of his was then tinged with the attitude of a great Tapasvi (ascetic). He always tried to live completely unattached. He would himself do all his

personal work. He had no regular Sevaka (attendant) in those days. At that time he did not like the company of people much. That was the reason why many were afraid to approach him.

Later on, we found this attitude of his gradually undergoing a change. So long as Sri Maharaj-ji (Swami Brahmananda) was alive, Mahapurush Maharaj had practically given no initiation. If somebody approached him for it, he would send him away. If perchance the person requested him for it again and again, he would ask him to get hold of the revered Sri Maharaj-ji. It was a little before Sri Maharaj-ji left his gross body, that Mahapurushji went to Dacca with Swami Abhedanandaji, and at Sri Maharaj-ji's request, and with his permission, started giving initiations. It was Sri Maharaj-ji, who was to have gone to Dacca. But knowing that he would not be able to do so, he said to Mahapurush Maharaj, "Tarak-da, under the circumstances, what will happen to those who seek initiation ? If you do not do, who will initiate them ?" It was in our presence that Sri Maharaj-ji laughed and said to him, "Tarak-da, be open-handed." Now is the time for you to distribute the accumulated power without stint." In order to be sure that Sri Maharaj-ji actually wanted him to give initiations, he asked him about it three times, and received the same answer every time. So he said, "Then let it be so. Victory to Sri Gurumaharaj!" and did as he was directed. Mahapurushji gave initiations at Dacca, Maimansingh and other places, without stint. Then, when he got news of the last illness of Sri Maharaj, he returned to the Math.

After Sri Maharaj-ji left his body, the responsibilities of the whole Math and Mission fell on his shoulders. Then we found that his nature underwent a complete change. At the time of giving initiation, he would say, "I am no one's Guru. It is Sri Thakur alone who is your Guru. I am simply offering you at His feet."

Towards the end of his life, he would not turn anybody away. I remember, once a few devotees had come from Barisal. I was then posted at Barisal. Knowing the devotees to be seeking initiation, I went to the revered Mahapurush Maharaj's room, and found him suffering very much from asthma. His monastic attendant told me "It is

impossible to broach the subject of initiation to him in his present state of health.” I also had the same feeling. But later on when I went to his room, I found him in a much better condition. Then I slowly raised the topic of initiation for the devotees. Hearing this, the compassionate Mahapurush Maharaj sent for them and gave them initiation there, in his own room.

Thus remaining in his human body for more than eighty long years, and spending his days in the hard austere ways of a Sannyasin, and, showering his infinite compassion on all who approached him, this great soul left his body in the year 1934. By his love and affection, not only we, but innumerable poor, afflicted and distressed people have become blessed. Even today whenever I think of my days with him, I am filled with bliss.

## CHAPTER V

## SWAMI SARADANANDA (1856-1927)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Swami Saradananda, known as Sarat Chandra in his premonastic days, was a brilliant student of the Calcutta University when he contacted the Great Master in 1883. During his discipleship under the Master, he became a fast friend and admirer of Narendranath who came to be known later as Swami Vivekananda. Like the other monastic brethren, he too spent his early days in hard austerities, holy wanderings and study, but at the call of Swami Vivekananda he took to active missionary work, in which he engaged himself till his end. For a time he had to do preaching work in America, but was soon called back by Swamiji to take up the onerous responsibility of being the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and the Mission he founded. He nurtured the infant organisation through all its vicissitudes, being its chief executive on whom all its responsibilities ultimately fell. As an accomplished Karma Yogi, he maintained a calm, sedate and unruffled temperament in all situations, and his firm yet extremely kind and benevolent disposition, made him eminently fit and successful in his organisational work, which was chiefly one of establishing harmonious human relations. Like the other disciples of the Great Master, he too played a very active and creative part in building up the traditions of the Order. He was specially devoted to the Holy Mother, and it was his self-chosen duty to be her personal caretaker as also the guardian and supporter of all the close dependants of the Holy Mother, for whom she had a responsibility. He built what came to be known as the Udbodhan Office, which formed the Calcutta residence of the Holy Mother, and he took his seat as the Mother's gate-keeper in one of its front rooms, from which he discharged all his secretarial duties and attended to his literary work. He was an all-round scholar both in oriental and occidental learning, and though he has not left behind him any vast body of Vedantic literature like Swami Vivekananda or Swami Abhedananda, he has given to posterity the most authoritative and exhaustive biography of the Great Master entitled *Sri Ramakrishna Leela Prasanga*, which has been translated into English under the name *Sri Ramakrishna the Greater Master*. It is a book that will stand for all time. He passed away in 1927.

Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, "He who sees Akarma (inaction) in Karma (action) and Karma (action) in Akarma (inaction)—he is the intelligent among men, he is the Yogi and the accomplisher of all actions." The simple meaning of this is that a true Karma Yogi engages himself in all kinds of action, but does not get entangled in them. Probably it was based on this very verse, that Swami Vivekananda said regarding Karma Yoga, "He is the ideal man who is extremely busy in the deepest solitude and quietness, as also feels the silence and the aloofness of the desert when engrossed in the greatest of activities. Though going about in a busy city full of continuously moving vehicles, his mind is calm, as if he were in a silent cave. This is the ideal of Karma Yoga."

It was in Swami Saradanandaji Maharaj that we saw the personification of this ideal Karma Yogi of Swamiji. In hundreds of activities and troubles we found him serene unperturbed and at peace. Though living in a very noisy quarter of Calcutta, it seemed to us that he was really enjoying the calm of the desert. And when he was sitting calmly without doing any work, we would feel that he was engrossed in thinking about the well-being not only of the Math and the Mission, but of many others. How many were the poor and the destitute, who found a place in his broad heart!

After joining the Math, when we came in close contact with him, we felt that the 'Udbodhan', or the 'the Mothers House', as his residence was often called, was a unique place. As Swami Saradananda, the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, stayed there, it was a centre of great activities. The Holy Mother had just passed away. Several ladies like the Holy Mother's companions, Golap-Ma and Yogin-Ma, and some other lady attendants of hers, were still staying at the Mother's House. The destitute grandsons of Yogin-Ma too had found shelter there. Again the establishment at Jayrambati and the Holy Mother's relations like Radhu were being taken care of from this place. The responsibilities for all these were on the broad shoulders of the revered Sarat Maharaj.

All the activities of the Math and the Mission were then being looked after from the Udbodhan. Revered Mahapurush Maharaj (Swami Shivanandaji) was then the Vice-President of the Math and the Mission as also the abbot of the Belur Math. Having spent a long time in severe austerities, it was not possible for him to take an active part in the various works of the Math and the Mission. The President of the Math and the Mission, the revered Swami Brahmanandaji, would always stay on a very high spiritual plane. It was not possible for him, too, to come down and look after the affairs of the Math and manage them. So it was revered Sarat Maharaj alone, who had to bear all the responsibilities of the Math and the Mission. Ever vigilant and active as he was, he was able to face the situation remarkably well. Revered Sri Maharaj-ji would mostly be at Bhuvaneswar at this time. It was only when a special

problem arose about the Math and the Mission, or his presence was required for some special work, that Swami Saradanandaji would take refuge in him, sending him persistent entreaties to come to the Math, or any other place where he needed his help. And as soon as the need was met, he would again make it possible for Sri Maharaj to go away and live in the exalted spiritual plane undisturbed.

The Sadhus, who were then posted at the Udbodhan, though good workers, were not all of a cool temperament. But even in the midst of various conflicts, we never saw Swami Saradanandaji ruffled. Like a calm, sedate, able leader, he would overcome all the impediments and take the Order towards its goal.

To serve the poor and the destitute people ravaged by famines, floods, etc., was then a daily feature of the Mission's work. Whenever such a call for service came, revered Sarat Maharaj, unmindful of the paucity of workers, would at once send some to start the relief work. He would not rest content after sending the workers. They had to send him regularly detailed reports of the work and the condition of the workers, and he would also send them regular directions for conducting the work. If perchance he found any procrastination or extravagance on the part of the workers, he would reprimand them and caution them so that it did not occur again. But if some outsider or institution passed some adverse remarks or criticisms against the workers, he would with great vehemence show the hollowness of these charges and would ask his workers to carry on with their work diligently, without paying the least attention to such remarks. We have experienced this when conducting flood relief work at Naogaon and in the Rajshahi district. After carrying on the work for two long months, and finding no further necessity for it, we had wound up the work under the revered Sarat Maharaj's instructions. There was a hue and cry against this from some of the relief organisations which had come in the field rather late. The newspapers also published various comments on this matter. But the revered Sarat Maharaj, ignoring these remarks, made it known to the public that, with the long experience behind it, the Mission knew very well when a relief work had to be started and when it should be

brought to a close. Those who, goaded by their new enthusiasm, wanted to carry on with the work, stood in need of more experience. The papers criticized this remark of the revered Sarat Maharaj, but he remained adamant. Later on, the public realised the truth of his statement.

The British Government, although it did not say so publicly, did not look upon the activities of the Mission with great favour. It is now known to all how Lord Garmichael, the then Governor of Bengal, had cast aspersions on the Mission in his speech at the Dacca Durbar in 1916. As a result of this, many members and devotees of the Math and the Mission got afraid and asked revered Sarat Maharaj to advise them as to what course they should adopt. In answer he advised them not to be panicky but to remain unperturbed, holding on to the truth. Accompanied by Miss MacLeod he himself went and met Lord Carmichael, and explained to him the aims and activities of the Mission. After some time, in another speech, Lord Carmichael withdrew his previous remarks.

I am reminded of another incident which specially brings out the firmness and fearlessness of revered Sarat Maharaj. Once there occurred a great famine in the district of Barisal and the relief work for the famine stricken people was started from the Bharukathi Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, with the help of the Ramakrishna Mission. When a few people died of hunger there, the Head of the above Ashrama, Sri Manoranjan Das Gupta, published that news in the papers. As a result of this, he fell into the bad books of the Government, and the police visited the Ashrama again and again, and asked him to withdraw that statement. When he asked revered Sarat Maharaj as to what he should do under the circumstances, the latter wrote back, "Never stray from the truth. If the information that you gave is true, do not retract it for fear of anybody. Sri Thakur will see you through." Later on, when the news proved to be true, the government changed their attitude towards the Head of the Ashrama.

Although he was so strict, fearless and firm of conviction in the field of work, his heart was softer than a flower. At the Udbodhan he gave



shelter to innumerable persons, who had fallen victims to the Government's anger and become sick in body and mind due to ill treatment in the detention camps of the police. Both Swami Prajnananda (Devabrata Basu) and Swami Chinmayananda (Sachin) were implicated in the Manicktala conspiracy case. Swami Atmaprakashananda (Priyanath) and Swami Satyananda (Satish) also were of the anarchist group. After their release, if Swami Saradanandaji had not taken them under his protective wings, it is doubtful if they could have become Sannyasins of the Math.

He was the great refuge of half-mad people like Advaita Chaitanya who had joined the order about the same time as we did. He was initiated into Brahmacharya in due course. But unfortunately, a little later, his brain got deranged. Then he would move about—going sometimes to the Math, sometimes to Calcutta or to other places. Seeing him in this condition, revered Sarat Maharaj gave him shelter at the Udbodhan and made proper arrangements for his medical treatment. When he became very sick about this time, revered Sarat Maharaj had his case diagnosed by the doctor and asked his attendants to give him medicines regularly. But the madcap Advaita refused to take the medicines. When the attendants told revered Sarat Maharaj about it, the latter went to his bedside and said, “My dear Advaita, please take the medicine. You will be cured.” In reply to this the patient answered, “Oh, you are addressing me as ‘my dear’ now. But when you take Rasagullas, you do not address me as such.” The unruffled Sarat Maharaj, who wished him well, said, “My dear child, please take the medicine now. Later on they will serve you Rasagullas.” Where can we find such a kind-hearted personage!

We have come to know of another incident from a very reliable source. It shows how soft and compassionate his heart was. Once, one of our Sannyasins unfortunately, got implicated in a very undesirable activity. Though the Math authorities had asked him again and again to be careful, he was not able to control himself due to his ‘Prarabdha’ (or actions of his previous birth). When he had got beyond correction, the Math authorities decided to send him back to his ancestral place,—that

is, to dismiss him from the Order. With that end in view, they sent him with two Brahmacharins to the revered Sarat Maharaaj, the idea being, to let the Secretary of the Math and Mission know about it and then put him in the railway train. When the Brahmacharins reached the Udbodhan with him, revered Sarat Maharaj got news of it. He was sitting in a room on the first floor. He at once asked the Brahmacharins to return to the Belur Math and going down to the ground floor to the erring Sannyasin, said to him with great affection, "My dear child, where will you go? Just remain here. I shall make all arrangements for you myself." The Sannyasin's heart melted at this compassion shown to him and he decided to stay at the Udbodhan. He did stay there for a while, happily. But the 'Prarabda' was strong, and ultimately he could not stay on for long but left.

In those days, when the Sannyasins of the Belur Math got sick, it was difficult to bear the expenses for their treatment and diet because of the paucity of funds. We have heard that revered Jnan Maharaj had, on account of this, got the *Sri Ramakrishna-Upadesa*, a collection of the Great Master's Sayings compiled by Swami Brahmananda, printed into a book and started selling it to the devotees at a small price, the idea being that from the money thus collected, the expenses for the treatment of the sick monastics should be met. But this action gave rise to much controversy. Revered Sarat Maharaj, coming to know of this, said to Jnan Maharaj one day at the Math, "Look here, Jnan, you please give the book to me. From now on, I shall take the responsibility of the nursing and the treatment of the sick Sannyasins of the Math." Henceforward for a long time, in spite of the paucity of space at the Udbodhan, the sick Sadhus of the Math would come and stay there, and under the loving care of revered Sarat Maharaj, get the best possible medical treatment.

Mention may be made here of the case of Govinda alias Swami Tattwananda. Tattwananda had joined the Math about the time that we did, and had been a worker at the Udbodhan for some time. When revered Sarat Maharaj had been away from the Udbodhan for a while, Govinda contracted small pox. Thinking that it was not safe to keep the

patient in the small house of the Udbodhan, the authorities got him admitted at the Carmichael (now R.G.Kar) Medical College Hospital. Unfortunately within a few days, Govinda passed away there. After some days, when revered Sarat Maharaj came back, he was very much pained to hear of Govinda being sent to a hospital and about his death there. Expressing his disapproval of the behaviour towards Govinda, he said in a voice choked with feeling, 'From now on, even if I fall ill, send me too to the hospital.' Such compassionate words can issue only from the lips of a great soul.

He was always a father and a mother to the poor and the down-trodden. Long after he had left his body, we came across an account book maintained by him. In it he had written in his own clear hand, how much a widow had deposited with him, or how much a mendicant had entrusted to him from his collection by begging, and how much they had taken back from those sums, etc.

His reverential regard for 'women as a class', as representative of Divine Motherhood, was something unique. In his dedication of his book *Bhārater Śaktipujā* (the Worship of Sakti in India), he has written, "It is at the feet of those, through whose compassionate glance the author had been blessed with the realisation of the special manifestation of the power of The Mother of the Universe in all female forms, that this book is being dedicated with great devotion." It is indeed very true that he had always paid such respect and devotion to 'the class of the Mother' (or all female forms). During his last few years, he handed over the running of the Math and the Mission to the new generation of Sannyasins and spent most of his time in Japa and meditation. Then, too, before and after his noonday meal, how many ladies used to come to him and narrate to him with an open heart their wants and complaints, and he too with great love and sympathy give them a patient hearing! When he left his body, we felt that these had now become really destitute, that perhaps they had now no place where they could go and tell their tales of woe with an open heart.

After joining the Math, we had rarely the good fortune of coming in close contact with revered Sarat Maharaj. We lived in Belur Math and

would go to Calcutta only if there was some special work. It was only then that we could get the company of revered Sarat Maharaj for a short while. Again, if he visited the Math for some work, we would sometimes get the opportunity to render some personal service to him. But I clearly remember the occasion when I met him for the first time at the Udbodhan. I had come to Calcutta on some errand and halted at the Udbodhan Office. Coming to know that I was a new entrant to the Math, the then Pujari (the worshipping monastic) kindly took me to the Holy Mother's room. She had just recently passed into Mahasamadhi. The worship of Sri Thakur was not then conducted with much paraphernalia. The Pujari himself would prepare the sandalwood paste, arrange the flowers and sit for conducting the worship. I sat in the small verandah to the north of the Holy Mother's room, and tried to do a little Japa and meditation. I do not remember how long I sat thus. When going to the Holy Mothers' Shrine, I passed by the front of the revered Sarat Maharaj's toom, which I found closed then. When returning, I found the room open. Most probably after his Japa and meditation, he had taken his tea, and was just sitting quietly. With my heart palpitating, I was passing by his room, when he called me affectionately. I approached him with diffidence and made prostration to him. If I remember right, I had seen him before only once or twice at the Math. But seeing his grave appearance, I had not dared to go near him. This time, at his affectionate call, my heart melted. I approached him and sat very near him. He also started asking me various questions. I felt as if he was my very own. His first question was, what I had been doing in the Holy Mother's room so long—whether I was witnessing the performance of the Puja, or was busying myself in some other way. In reply, when I told him that I tried to do some Japa and meditation, he was very much pleased. He then asked me many other questions like: whether I had taken initiation, whom had I taken as my chosen deity, what mode of approach I liked best—'with form or without form,' etc. When I informed him that I had not had my initiation so far, he said, "Well, that does not matter much. But then, so long as the deity has not been chosen, there is much frittering away of energy. After the taking of initiation, this does not occur." About the question of 'Sakara' and 'Nirakara' ('with form' and 'without form'), when I informed him that I

had greater faith in the latter, he said, “Well, that is all right. But then know that Sakara also is true. You must have heard what Swamiji used to say—that if snapshots are taken of the sun from different distances, the pictures are different, but none of them is untrue. Every one of them is the picture of the same sun.”

In the course of this conversation, he suddenly asked me, “By the way, I have heard that a boy, who had been ‘interned’ before, has recently joined the Math. Do you know him?” With my head down I answered, “Yes, Maharaj, I am that very boy.” I had not mentioned about this to any one when I joined the Math. For, I had heard that if the authorities of the Math came to know about it, they might not allow me to join. But a class fellow of mine had apprised revered Mahapurush Maharaj about it. I started wondering how the information had come to the ears of revered Sarat Maharaj. This brought some fear too in me in its wake. But I found that Sarat Maharaj was not at all vexed or perturbed by this, but went on asking me questions like why it had happened and so on. I also narrated to him everything frankly.

That day he told me many things about spiritual practice, which, being very personal, I cannot mention here. When I went down after this conversation, some of the monastics there exclaimed, “You really have had your initiation today!” I did not understand it as such then.

But now, when I ponder over it, I cannot help feeling that perhaps he was my first ‘Guru.’

A few years after this, I had come to the Math from Dacca. One evening near about dusk, I had gone to the Udbodhan with Swami Tyagiswarananda, to pay my homage to the revered Sarat Maharaj. The Maharaj was then sitting in that small room of his. Around him, there were Sannyal Mahashay, Kshirode, Vidyabinode and a few other devotees—all of them sitting quiet. Suddenly the revered Maharaj said, “Ask me questions on all your doubts.” We had gone there just to have his blessed company. We had no questions to ask, and so we kept quiet. But the Maharaj said again, “Has none of you any questions ? Why are you sitting quietly ?” So for question’s sake I asked him, “Maharaj, you

all had started working after you had undergone so much of spiritual practices and had realisation of God. Then why is it that you are making us do work from the moment that we join the Math?" Without losing his temper in the least, the revered Sarat Maharaj answered : "Do you think that you can be like Sri Ramakrishna or Swamiji—first have realisation and then come down to work? Just listen, neither you nor I will ever be able to be so. We have to carry on with both spiritual practice and work together, side by side. We cannot leave either of them."

I did not have any further contacts with him. But the memory of those two days, is ever vibrant in my mind.

## CHAPTER VI

## SWAMI ABHEDANANDA (1866-1939)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Swami Abhedananda, known also as Kali Maharaj, was one of the most scholarly disciples of the Master, besides being a great ascetic and a man of unique spiritual experiences. He was both an erudite Sanskritist and an eloquent speaker in English. Meeting the Great Master and entering into discipleship under him in 1884, he spent several years after the Master's demise in hard study and intense meditation at the Head Math of the Order and at various holy places and mountain retreats as a wandering ascetic. In 1896, he was called first to England and then to the United States by Swami Vivekananda to succeed him in the work of propagating Vedanta in the West. During the following 25 years, he did intensive preaching work in the West and established several Vedanta Societies. He returned to India in 1921 and did much preaching work in this country also afterwards. He passed away in 1939 at the age of 73. Unlike many of the other direct disciples of the Master, the Swami has left behind a record of a very valuable and voluminous body of Vedanta lectures, which are today available in eleven volumes of respectable size. They form one of the most erudite and exhaustive body of literature in good English available for a modern student of this great theme.

In the month of September 1921, Srimat Swami Abhedanandaji Maharaj returned to India from America. We had already heard from the old Sannyasins of the Math about his impending return. It was from them that we came to know that he had gone to the West at the bidding of Swamiji, and that after preaching in London for some time he sailed to America, where he had been preaching for the past twenty five years. We had also heard from them about his vast learning. So it was natural that we, who had then just joined the Math, felt a keen desire to meet him and come in contact with him.

He arrived at the Math in September. I well remember how that day a number of senior Sannyasins had gone to the Prinsep Ghat (Wharf) to welcome him and bring him to the Math. The ship was coming from Rangoon. The Sannyasins who had gone to receive the Swami had to wait there for several hours before being even informed that the ship would be in the harbour only by about 2 p.m. At this the Sannyasins decided to go back to the Math, have their lunch and then return at the proper time. But all of a sudden, the direction of the wind and the current became favourable, and the ship arrived in the harbour by 1 p.m. Revered Swami Abhedanandaji, on not finding any one from the Math, got into a hackney coach (there was no cab or taxi then) and arrived at the Math. Seeing him there arriving unescorted, many



became embarrassed and speechless, while those who had gone to receive him felt abashed. But he did not blame anybody for it, and asked his luggage to be put at the right place. Revered Mahapurush Maharaj was not then at the Math. He had gone on a visit to the South with the revered Maharaj-ji (Swami Brahmanandaji). It was therefore his room that was kept ready for the revered Swami Abhedanandaji. So we carried his luggage there and kept it arranged.

Although I had joined the Math only recently, it was on me that they put the duty of serving him. Swami Maneeshananda was chosen as my helper. As I had never before attended on such an august personage, it was natural that I committed many mistakes. Though the revered Maharaj did not mind these at all, he said, finding my difficulty, "As you are not experienced in this kind of work, let Maneeshananda take full charge of it, and you better be his helper." I agreed to this with all my heart, and from then on, did my best to serve him as Maneeshananda's helper. It was thus that, from then on, to when he left for Kashmir in 1922, I had the good fortune to serve him and come in close contact with him. What characteristic features I had noticed in his behaviour and what precious words I had heard from him during this period, I shall try to put down in words.

When he got down from the hackney carriage, we had expected to see him dressed in coat and trousers. But instead of this, we found him dressed in 'gerua' (ochre) like the Indian Sannyasins. When asked as to where he had got them, he said that Swami Shyamanandaji, the Head of the Ramakrishna Sevashrama at Rangoon, had got them ready for him under his instructions.

After resting a little, he walked to the Shrine Room of the Math. It had been closed after Thakur's noonday food-offering and according to practice it could be opened only in the afternoon. But standing before the Shrine, the Swami exclaimed in a tone of great longing, "Will I not be allowed to have Darshan of Sri Thakur now!" Seeing his eagerness, the then Pujari (the monk-priest) of the Math, Swami Jyotirmayanandaji, opened the door of the Shrine Room at once. He then went inside and fell flat full length on the ground to make what is called a Sashtanga-

pranam or total prostration to Sri Thakur. Jyotirmayanandaji told us in an aside, "A direct disciple of Sri Thakur has come. He wants to meet him. Under the circumstances, can one follow strictly the general rules of the Math ? That is the reason why I opened the room for him. If Sri Thakur were in his earthly body-today, how much indeed would he have been pleased to meet his son returning from abroad after such a long time!'

When he returned from the Shrine Room, he was asked what kind of food he would like to be served to him. He at once replied that he would take Sri Thakur's Prasad, the same as we all did—and he actually followed this regularly for the next few days. But he could not stand it long, accustomed as he was to Western food for such a long time. Soon he got diarrhoea, and had to be more careful about his food.

The very next day after Swami Abhedanandaji reached the Math, the revered Sarat Maharaj (Swami Saradananda) came to meet him from Udbodhan. The meeting of the two brothers after such a long separation was indeed a sight for the gods. As they met, the revered Sarat Maharaj put his arms round him in a loving embrace, saying, "So here you are, Saheb!" Swami Abhedananda, too, embracing Sarat Maharaj and casting his glance at his stout body, remarked regretfully, "So your body has now become like this!" and took the dust of Sarat Maharaj's feet. Then talking about various topics concerning this country and others, they spent the whole of the afternoon in each other's company. It looked as if two boys, bosom friends of the same age, had met again after a long separation. A few days after this, a youth by the name Rashbehari, who was known to the Math, came, and introducing himself to the Swami, said, "Maharaj, I am an M.Sc. student and am now working with the Oxford Mission. The missionaries of that place are passing derogatory remarks about your speech on Jesus Christ delivered at Rangoon. They would very much like to meet you and know the exact purport of your speech." Hearing this, the Maharaj said that they were very welcome to do so. A few days after this, Rashbehari came accompanied by the missionary who was the head of the Mission.

The revered Maharaj was then sitting in the verandah after his noonday meal. At the approach of the Sahib, he asked for a chair to be brought for him, and when he was comfortably seated, the Maharaj started talking, with the speech in question as the topic. As far as I remember, the talk began in a very cordial atmosphere. But later on it became rather heated. The Sahib again and again tried to maintain that the Swami had attacked Christianity in the speech that he had delivered at Rangoon. In reply to this, the Swami maintained that he had not attacked Christianity but had hit at the way it was being preached, at the way the Bible was being interpreted. ‘Why do you not explain the Bible in the correct way ? If you had done so, everybody would have been benefited,’ continued the Swami. At this the Sahib felt very much hurt and started saying that the Hindus too gave wrong interpretations of the Vedas. He further said that to discuss about it he would come another day with a friend who was very learned in Sanskrit. The Maharaj agreed to this proposal. On the appointed day the Sahib brought his friend with him, and in introducing him to the Swami, said, “He is one of our missionaries. He has taken his M.A. degree from the Oxford University in Sanskrit, and came first in it. He is a great scholar in the Vedas—rather, he is an authority on it.” At this the Maharaj sat up erect and asked, “Is he really an *authority* on the Vedas?” The Sahib replied that he was really an ‘authority’ on the subject, and whatever he said about it, people took as truth. The Swami lost his temper now and shouted, “No, he cannot be an *authority* !” Whereupon the Sahib was equally angry and countered, “Then, who is an authority?” Putting his hand on his chest, the Swami said, “It is we, who are the authorities. You cannot be so. Just by reading a book or two on the Vedas, one cannot know their real import.” It is needless to say that the two Sahibs felt much offended, and at once left the place. Later on the Swami told us, “You are afraid of these Sahibs! How little do they know of this subject! I have met their greatest philosophers like James, Royce, etc., at different meetings in America and discussed about it all with them. And on many occasions, listening to our philosophic truths, they have had to accept them.” Referring to one such dinner party, he said, “I had gone there for dinner and found the leading philosopher James (William James) also as one of the guests. After preliminary conversations, he started a long

discourse on the subject of his research, 'The plurality of the Universe'. Then it came home to me that it was to make me hear it that I had been invited to this dinner party. After it came to an end, the host asked me, 'Swamiji, have you anything to say on the topic?' We are confirmed Advaitins (non-dualists). So how then could I accept his point of view? I stood up and rebutted his arguments point by point, and then established our viewpoint: 'It is from the One without a second that all this that we call the Universe has come out and it is It alone, who is permeating everything.' I don't know if Mr. James accepted everything but there is no doubt that he was very pleased to hear it all."

Gradually many literary men, scientists and educationists and others started coming to the Math to meet the Maharaj. They were pleased to have discussions with him from the comparative view points of Indian and Western thought, on subjects like literature, science and education. Soon they arranged to have a big gathering in Calcutta to felicitate him on the success of his preaching in the West. By now he had become a well-known figure in Calcutta. His simplicity and child-like nature were not in the least affected by all this. I cannot but narrate a few incidents illustrating this feature of his character.

Very close to the Math, there is the famous 'Rasa House' of the 'Dawns' (the surname of a family). Every year at the time of the 'Rasa' (Sri Krishna's play with the Gopis) a big 'Fair' is held there. Dolls of various kinds—of gods, goddesses and others—are arranged there. There are also stalls of local sweets and snacks. The Fair continues for several days. On one of these days, the Maharaj said to us "Come, let us visit the Fair one day. It is a long time since I saw it last in 1906 on my return to India for the first time." We could not dissuade him from his intention by putting in excuses like: "Oh! all types of people collect there", "Oh! it is too crowded always" and so on. One evening he arrived there with us as his companions, and started going from one stall to another like an ordinary visitor, appreciating the various dolls and toys. Then he said, "Look here, Sri Thakur used to say that one who visits such a place should buy something, so that the poor who bring their merchandise in the hope of making a profit, do not return home empty-

handed. So just see what we can buy.” We went and bought something like a knife, but he was not satisfied. He said, “See what edibles they have for sale.” Saying that they were not good and were stale, we could pacify him for the time being. But as soon as his eyes fell on a stall where they were selling peanuts, he asked us to buy some. Whereupon we bought three packets of it. Giving us two of these, he took one for himself, and started eating from it then and there like a boy of five years, as if he had forgotten that he was an elderly Sannaysin of great repute, returned from America after preaching Vedanta there for 25 years. The thought came to us that he had become a boy again, remembering Thakur alone to the exclusion of everything else!

During this period he told us once, “Listen! Many in America would ask me how old I was. To this I would reply that I was most probably near about 30-32 years old. At this they would be surprised and would stare at me. Then I would explain to them that I calculated my age not from the day that I was physically born, but from the day that I had met Sri Thakur and he had drawn me to him by his love to become ‘his very own’, *i.e.*, from about 1883-84.”

Another day in the course of a conversation he said, “Again some of them in that country would ask me if I had the vision of the Lord. To this I would reply, “Certainly.” At this we asked rather doubtfully, “Is it a fact, Maharaj, that you have had the vision of the Lord?” Immediately he replied with a firm voice, “I have certainly had it. I have met Sri Thakur. What more is left for me to attain ?” Seeing his infinite faith and devotion for Sri Thakur, we were really astounded and charmed, and we began to think longingly, “Oh, when will that blessed day dawn, when we too like him will be able to realise that Sri Thakur is our ‘very own’!”

After he had stayed at the Belur Math for some time, Swami Abhedanandaji Maharaj felt somewhat indisposed. It was therefore probably for a change and also to be able to meet more closely the old devotees and residents of Calcutta, that he now came to the city and stayed at the house of the well-known devotee Balaram Babu. As his attendants, we also accompanied him. I record below what I saw of him during this period of my association with him.

After he had been here for a few days, he got a sudden attack of diarrhoea. Revered Swami Dheerananda Maharaj (Krishnalal Maharaj) was then staying at Balaram Babu's house, virtually as the guardian of the household. When he found the Maharaj sick, he told him, "Dr. Bepin Ghosh lives very near this place. If you permit us, we shall call him to examine you." Bepin Babu was very well known to the Swamis even before. He was a near relation of revered Baburam Maharaj, and had been to Sri Thakur many a time with the members of his family. As soon as he heard about him, the Maharaj asked him to be sent for, and accordingly told me to go to the doctor's Kambalitola house. Hearing about the revered Maharaj's illness, the doctor wound up his work with the patients, and within a short time came to him. Now we witnessed a wonderful happening, which can possibly take place only with the sons of Sri Thakur. We were all sitting there eagerly awaiting the doctor's arrival. But as soon as the doctor came, the Maharaj accosted him saying, "How are you doctor?" and embraced him tightly. For the next fifteen or twenty minutes they talked only about Sri Thakur. The conversation turned afterwards about the various experiences of the Maharaj in America. We simply sat there silent. After about half an hour had passed this way, the doctor, perhaps to remind him of his physical condition, said: "By the way, Brother, why did you send for me?" It was then that the Maharaj began to think of his ailment. He said, "Well, doctor, since last night my bowels have moved several times. That is why we sent for you." The doctor then wrote out a prescription, and asked us to get the medicines. Seeing the prescription, the Maharaj asked, "Well, doctor, do you have faith in these medicines?" The doctor also frankly told him, "Well, Brother, now that you have asked me about it, I must, to be frank, acknowledge that I have no faith in the medicines. I have seen the same medicine working in different ways on different people—some one may be cured by it, while it may have no effect on another." Hearing this, the Maharaj, whose experience and knowledge were varied and vast, said, "Yes, doctor, in that country also, I have heard such opinions from some eminent doctors."

I remember that one day while we were there, Dani Babu (Suren Ghosh, son of the famous playwright and great devotee Girish Babu)

invited him to go to his theatre and see a play. He had seen Dani Babu many a time before, with the devotee Girish Babu. So he agreed to his request, and taking us with him one night, went to the Minerva. Dani Babu used to stay there to supervise the work of the theatre. They welcomed the Swami very cordially, and put him and us into a 'Box'. I remember very well that they were staging *Prafulla* that night. It is a social play written by Girish Babu. Dani Babu had taken the role of Yogesh, the principal character in it. It was being depicted how the simple-minded magnanimous elder brother Yogesh had been cheated on account of his good qualities by his second brother, who was wordly-minded and villainous, how having lost his possessions, he had taken recourse to drinking to get some relief from sorrow, and how he had at last been reduced to a life in the streets. The part of Yogesh was being played very well by Dani Babu. Seeing him portraying the different feelings that were passing through Yogesh at different times, we were very much charmed. But the Maharaj was fully aware of the good points and the shortcomings in the acting. After seeing the play for some time and finding the night pretty advanced, he became very eager to return. So he sent a certain employee of the theatre to inform Dani Babu about it. When Dani Babu came, he made salutations to the Maharaj and asked him how he had liked the play. In reply to this, the Maharaj simply said, "We have had the privilege of seeing the acting of your father." Dani Babu understood its meaning, and bowed down again before him and said, "Even then, it is my great good fortune that I am being blessed by you all." Then in the course of his conversation, he brought out a sacred thread from around his neck and said. "This was presented to me by Sri Maharaj-ji (Swami Brahmanandaji) after he had seen my acting as Sankaracharya, with the remark, 'You are indeed fit to put on the sacred thread'". In due course we returned to the Balaram Mandir.

On another day at the request of Sri Aparesh Mukhopadhyaya, we accompanied the Maharaj to the Star Theatre to see the play *Shahjehan*. It seemed that it was only to encourage the actor and the play wrights of the country, and not because he was interested in seeing shows, that the Maharaj went to see these plays. On another occasion, in the course

of a conversation he told Aparesh Babu “Please try to be original. Then the West too will appreciate you. They want originality. That is why they give so much respect to Sri Thakur. Sri Thakur was originality itself, that is the secret of their liking him very much.”

Some days after this, a few young devotees came from Jamshedpur to meet him. They had got up a small group there, called the Vivekananda Society. Their aim was to serve the poor and the needy as Narayanas (embodiments of God). Their request was that if the Maharaj visited the place, their society would be strengthened. The revered Maharaj, hearing their talk and knowing about their aim, at once agreed to go.

After some time the devotees came and took him there. We also accompanied him as his attendant. The devotees gave him a right royal reception. In an open meeting he was presented with an Address of Welcome in which it was mentioned, “Jamshedpur is a cosmopolitan town. It is not only from the different corners of India, but from different parts of the world, that experienced and expert workers come here for various types of work. But they are all worshippers of material values. In the constant din and bustle of the place, where is there the leisure for higher thoughts? We hope that by your short but auspicious visit, our hearts will become nobler, that we shall be able to visualise ‘work as worship’, and that the bond of friendship existing between the workers of different religions and communities will be strengthened.”

In reply to this, the Swami gave a beautiful short speech of great import, in which he said; “Religion is not mere idle talk, it is something that can be directly achieved. By coming in contact with Sri Thakur we have understood the great significance of it. He used to be always in divine inebriation. He knew no distinctions of caste or creed. The Buddhists, Jains, Muslims, Christians, all used to come to him, and each used to be charmed, seeing in him, the perfect manifestation of his own religion. He was as if the personification of all the religions. But he did not see the Lord only in himself, but would directly visualise Him in all beings. He used to feel the full manifestation of Him even in those



whom we look down upon with abhorrence. Purity or impurity, the Brahmana or an Untouchable, presented no difference to him. By serving the lowly and the down-trodden as 'Siva (the Lord) Himself', one has one's own heart purified. In the pure heart the Lord manifests Himself of His own accord. Everyone of the religions speaks thus. If by opening a centre of the Ramakrishna Mission here, you also serve the Jiva as Siva, your hearts will get nearer to the Lord"

He delivered three or four such lectures there. Later on, these were published in a book form as '*Lectures of Swami Abhedananda at Jamshedpur*'. As a result of his lectures, a permanent branch of the Ramakrishna Mission came into being there. Its work in the years that followed has helped the spirit of Karma Yoga take root in the heart of the community round about. Due to the eagerness of the devotees, the revered Maharaj went to see the Tata Iron and Steel Works one day. He took us also with him. He went round the various departments, and saw everything very minutely. This factory was then the best of its kind in India, and perhaps only second in the whole of Asia. So while returning, we were all showering our praise on it. But the Swamiji said, "It is indeed a very great achievement of Sri Jamshedji Tata, but some of the iron factories I saw in America can contain within them some eight or more of such works." Another day he paid a call on its General Manager (an American). The latter was surprised to find that, though a Sannyasin, the Maharaj had so much knowledge of engineering.

After returning from Jamshedpur, it was not possible for me to serve him for long. But whatever experience I had during the period that I happened to serve the Maharaj, I have tried to put in this short memoir. My humble prayer is that such great men like him may rouse our spirit by their blessings!

## CHAPTER VII

## SWAMI VIJNANANANDA (1868-1938)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Known as Hariprasanna in his premonastic life, Swami Vijnanananda had his first contact with the Great Master in 1883. After about two years of intimate contact and discipleship with the Master, he had to leave for Patna where he had his engineering education. For some time after completing his education, he worked as an Engineer in Government Service. In 1896, shortly before Swami Vivekananda's return from the West he gave up all his worldly connections and took to monastic life. He spent most of his time at Allahabad where he gradually developed an Ashrama between 1900-1910. His engineering experience found expression in the building of the Belur Math, which was constructed under his supervision. Besides being a good engineer, he was a deep scholar in Sanskrit in general, and especially in Hindu astronomical text, the Suryasiddhanta. There are a few learned works by him on these technical subjects. They are translations of the texts of Suryasiddhanta, Devi Bhagavata, Brihajataka, etc. A person of profound spiritual wisdom and insight together with deep scholarship, he was the type of a wise man who covered his wisdom by a screen of boyish and quizzical behaviour. He became the President of the Order in 1937, and was the last of the direct disciples of the Great Master to occupy that august position. He passed away in 1938, after having completed the construction and dedication of the present Belur Math Temple. As a builder of the Math's first building and as the one to whom Swami Vivekananda confided his architectural ideas regarding the Temple he had in mind, it was a godsent coincidences that he lived to participate in the building and the dedication of this most sacred structure of the Math.

In the Srimad *Bhagavata*, in reply to one of Uddhava's questions the Lord Sri Krishna describes the signs of a Sannyasin of spiritual realisation as follows: "Though very learned, he plays about like a boy; though expert in everything, he sits like an idiot; hearing his disjointed words, people take him as mad; though established in the Vedas, his behaviour is very uncertain." (*Bhagavata* 11.18.29)

The above, of course, is not applicable to a Sannyasin who is merely an enquirer (Vividishu) but only to a Vidwan or one who has attained knowledge or spiritual illumination. We have been blessed by witnessing the above qualities manifested in the pure life of Swami Vijnananandaji Maharaj, known familiarly as Vijnan Maharaj and Hariprasanna Maharaj. It is very true that although he was very erudite he behaved like a little boy. Although he was proficient in so many subjects, he would often sit quietly like an ignorant and dull person, completely unmindful of his surroundings. Many were the occasions when we could not understand what appeared to us as his incoherent utterances. He had studied so many scriptural works, but one could

never be sure of it from his outward behaviour. His attendants say that seeing his strange dress, boys on the streets of Allahabad used to stare at him. Seeing this, he would mischievously tell them, "What are you looking at—is it a monkey? Yes, it is a monkey, Ramji's monkey."

We have seen that his bed would always remain spread on his bedstead. Even if dust and dirt had accumulated on it, nobody was allowed to touch it without his permission for cleaning. Once a Sannyasin of our Math went to Allahabad hoping to live in his holy company for sometime. Seeing the condition of his bed, he dusted it and set it right during the Swami's absence. When the Maharaj returned, finding that the bed had been thus set right, he at once sent for the monk and showing him the Railway time table, told him, "Just look here, the time of the departure of your train today is such and such. You have to catch it to go back." In spite of the earnest entreaties of the Sannyasin, the order was not changed, and he had to leave that very day.

In a little niche just above this very bed, there used to be a photo of Sri Thakur. It was a strict rule that nobody should even touch it without his permission. During the hot season, there would be spread three beds for him. One of them would be in the inner courtyard, another in the verandah, and the third one inside his room. He would usually lie down on the one in the courtyard. If the wind and the rain came, he would move on to the one in the verandah. If the weather became very inclement, he would then sleep on the cot inside the room. But all the three of them would always be kept ready with mosquito nets, and even if they would be getting wet in the rain, nobody had permission to remove them.

He always liked to live alone, all by himself. If a visitor, be it even a Sannyasin of the Order, were allowed to stay at the Ashrama for a day or two, he would at the end of the stipulated time be shown the railway timetable, and directed to leave the Ashrama. When sick, he did not like to take medicines. If anybody informed the Math about his sickness, he would be very much displeased, and would ask the transgressor to

leave the Ashrama at once. Such was his extraordinarily amazing and apparently eccentric behaviour.

It was in 1921, that I met him for the first time. At that time he had come to the Math for the construction of Swamiji's new temple. A little earlier to his arrival, I had been given the task of conducting the Puja in Swamiji's Shrine. At that time, the Shrine had only the ground floor where Swamiji's statue is installed. It had also an open verandah around. There was no other structure near it. Beyond the Math building, the campus extending to the south, had no embankment on the river side, even where Swamiji's Shrine stood. At the time of flood-tide, the water of the Ganga would come almost up to the Swamiji's Shrine. It was a solitary place, and hardly anybody would approach it. Round about the building there lay strewn some bricks and other stray materials. One day a foreign gentleman (a Saheb), seeing us there, suddenly asked us, "Why do you keep Swami Vivekananda's Shrine in such a neglected condition ? Do you know what a great respect we in the West have for him?" We could not give him a satisfactory reply then. Later, when we told Mahapurush Maharaj about it, he said, "Why did you not tell him that improvements are being planned?" At that time we used to do some work in the office of the Math too. A Brahmachari was then in charge of the office. When we narrated everything to him, he said, "Mahapurush Maharaj has said the right thing. There will soon be added another storey above the present Shrine. The plan of it has already been settled and the required money too has been collected. But it is Vijnan Maharaj who has the responsibility to get it constructed. He stays in Allahabad and is a little whimsical. That is why it has not yet been settled when the work should start".

In continuation of this, he started telling us many things about the revered Vijnan Maharaj: "Formerly the Maharaj was an Executive Engineer of U.P., and when Swamiji was still living, he had resigned from that high post and come and joined the Order at the Alam-bazar Math. It was at the behest of Swamiji, that he himself took Vidwat Sannyasa (non-formal Sannyasa of an enlightened one) before the image of Sri Thakur. Then after the land for the Belur Math was

acquired, it was at the instance of Swamiji that the Maharaj constructed on it Sri Thakur's Shrine, the building for the monastics' living quarters, and above it, on the first floor, Swamiji's room. The embankment on the Ganga and the flight of steps too were the result of his untiring labour. He is a great scholar. He has translated a great authoritative book on astronomy known as the *Suryasiddhanta*. He has to his credit a few other learned books also." The said Brahmachari let us know in this connection something about the Swami's unique dress and behaviour, and along with it he also told us something of the divine visions and experiences that he had had. That was why we had been very eager for some time now to meet him.

I think it was in the month of Phalgun (Feb.—March) or Chaitra (March-April) that my first meeting with him took place. We saw a hackney carriage suddenly come to a halt on the meadow in front of the Math, and the Swami got down from it. We do not know if he had informed anybody in advance about his coming. But seeing him alighting alone from the carriage, we thought that no information had reached the Math. That which caught our attention first, was his unique dress. "Unique" is indeed the correct word for it. On his head was a woollen cap which covered both his ears on the sides. He had put on a very long warm coat, which almost reached up to his knee. It had many big pockets on the two sides. These could hold many things within. He was wearing a small dhoti about five cubits long. On his legs were a pair of socks and a pair of slippers. Getting down from the carriage, he went straight to Swamiji's Shrine. and whomever he met near about (most probably Swami Sankarananda was one of them), he started asking what materials had been collected for the construction of Swamiji's Shrine. After hearing the details, he proceeded towards the Math building. They had got ready for him the small room by the side of Swamiji's room, which was known to him as 'Khoka Maharaji's room'. He went into it. Brahmachari Buddha Chaitanya, the late Swami Bhaswarananda was deputed to serve him. After food and rest, he again started talking with Swami Sankarananda and others about Swamiji's Shrine.

Very soon the materials were all collected and he began the construction work. He was then aged above fifty, and his body was very stout. Even then he put in very hard and tireless work in connection with the construction. In the morning after taking his tea and a little snack, he would present himself at eight o'clock at the place of construction as the labourers arrived, and would be on the work spot till one in the afternoon, *i.e.*, till the masons and other workers had their noon-day break. He would be standing or sitting on the bench under the nearby deodar tree, and would be inspecting minutely every piece of work that was being executed. At 1 o'clock when there was a respite in the work, he would come, wash his hands and face (he would seldom take a bath then), take his noon-day meal and have a little rest. Then, when the work started again at 2 o'clock, he would get up from his rest and be there with the labourers. Seeing him do so much hard work at such an advanced age, our heads would bend down in shame on thinking about ourselves.

From our friend Swami Bhaswarananda I heard that at that time his diet was very simple. In the morning he would have a number of cups of tea with very little milk in it and a Sandesh or two (Thakur's Prasada) and then start his work. At noon, after returning from his supervision of the construction work, he would just have a wash, and take the ordinary Prasada of Sri Thakur. In the evening he had only a few cups of tea, and at night the regular Prasada of Sri Thakur.

After some days Sri Maharaj-ji (Swami Brahmanandaji) came to Belur Math from Bhuvaneswar. He at once made some improvements in Vijnan Maharaji's food. He also arranged to get from the confectionary shop whatever the latter was fond of and to have them served to him. He also enquired now and then how he relished his food. Vijnan Maharaj, too, like a small boy, would tell him everything about his food. Seeing the mutual love, affection and regard between the two brothers, I would be simply charmed.

At that time Sri Maharaj-ji, would leave his bed very early in the morning, wash his face and hands, and filled with divine inebriation, would sit at ease, on his easy chair placed in the verandah of the first

storey, facing the Ganga. We, the Sadhus and Brahmacharins, would make prostrations to him one by one, and then sit on our respective seats and practise Japa and meditation. His brother disciples, after finishing their Japa and meditation, would mostly salute him touching the ground, saying 'Suprabhat' (good morning). But Vijnan Maharaj alone was an exception. He would not be satisfied like others with a 'Suprabhat' and the usual greeting, but every morning and evening he would, openly before us all, fall flat full length on the ground in salutation to Maharaj-ji, and would get up only at Maharaj-ji's bidding. I heard Sri Maharaj-ji passing the following remark about him this time: "Payson's (an endearing abbreviation for 'Hariprasanna', the former name of Vijnan Maharaj) devotion is just next to that of Sashi Maharaj (Swami Ramakrishnananda) only."

At nightfall after Aratrika (vespers), we would again gather before Sri Maharaj-ji. The brother disciples of Sri Maharaj-ji as well as the old Sannyasins would join us there. Sometimes Sri Maharaj-ji would tell us, "Why are you thus sitting here quietly for nothing? Just ask some questions. Better put them to Payson. You most probably do not know that Payson is a 'hidden Yogi'. He is the person to give the right answer to your questions." Often none of us could find a question to ask. It would then be Sri Maharaj-ji himself who would ask Vijnan Maharaj a question or two on our behalf, and the latter would, like an ignorant boy, answer with folded hands, "Please, Maharaj-ji, what do I know? Please be gracious enough to answer them yourself." Of course, Maharaj-ji would not let him off so easily, and in the end Vijnan Maharaj had to say something by way of answer. Thus, though so learned, we saw him behaving like a small boy.

Sri Maharaj-ji would daily ask him about the progress of the construction work of Swamiji's Shrine, and if he suspected any defects in the construction, he would let Vijnan Maharaj know about them. Vijnan Maharaj, too, on his part, would accept these with great reverence, and sometimes would ask Sri Maharaj-ji even in our presence, "Maharaj-ji, how did you come to know about these?" Maharaj-ji, too with a smile on his face, would answer, "Payson, through



the grace of the Guru, everything comes of its own accord." Vijnan Maharaj, though he had been a highly placed Government Engineer before, would accept the corrections without a murmur.

The unique regard that Vijnan Maharaj had for Sri Maharaj-ji and also his childlike behaviour with him, which we witnessed one day, have remained indelible in our mind. For the construction work of Swamiji's Shrine a large number of labourers, both male and female, were engaged, Sri Maharaj-ji was specially kind to one of the women labourers amongst them and would send for her now and then, and give her some Prasada to eat. Thus one day when he was having his noon meal, Sri Maharaj-ji suddenly said to his attendants, "Go and fetch that girl. I see that I have some fine sweets on my plate. I mean to give her some of them." At this one of the attendants went at once to Vijnan Maharaj and told him about this. Refusing permission, he said, "She cannot leave the work now. She has just started it only." When Sri Maharaj-ji was informed of this, he said, "Go again and tell Payson that it is I, who am sending the message. He will then allow her to come." But this time, too, Vijnan Maharaj said, "No, it is not possible for me to release her now. There is so much of the work that remains to be finished. As soon as that is finished, I shall let her go." The moment Sri Maharaj-ji heard this, he became very grave and at once got up, leaving his meal unfinished. Washing his hands and mouth, he went to his room, closed the door and laid himself down on the bed. When this news was brought to Vijnan Maharaj, he at once stopped all work, ran to Sri Maharaj-ji, knocked gently at his door, calling out 'Maharaj-ji, Maharaj-ji.' But Maharaj-ji did not open his door. Then Vijnan Maharaj retraced his steps for some distance, but came back again and knocked gently at the door, calling out, 'Maharaj-ji, Maharaj-ji This time too the door was not opened. We were near him. Then he said to us in a very pathetic voice, "Brother, has Maharaj-ji become very angry? What a fool I had been not to release her as soon as I had heard of Maharaj-ji's wish?" He said it again and again, and showed his concern in words. That noon he could not take any food. Sri Maharaj-ji, who had got up from his half-finished meal and gone in and closed the door of his room, opened it only at four in the evening. Then he came to know that Vijnan

Maharaj had not yet taken his noon-day meal and had gone back to his work at the right time. Maharaj-ji immediately told his attendant, "Go and bring me quickly a plate of big 'rajbhog ' and other good sweets that we have, and also fetch me Hari Prasanna. He has a special liking for these." When Vijnan Maharaj was told that Sri Maharaj-ji had sent for him, he at once came running, made prostration to Maharaj-ji and said with tears in his eyes, "Maharaj-ji what a great fool I have been! What a great mistake I committed in not obeying you!" At this Maharaj-ji simply said to him affectionately, "Forget about it. You have been fasting for the whole day. Here is food for you—this plate of varieties of sweets which I know are specially to your liking." Hearing this, Vijnan Maharaj sat down for his meal in front of Sri Maharaj-ji and like a little boy, ate all the sweets one by one. Such was the deep love that they had for each other.

A similar event happened another day. I shall narrate how on that day he behaved like a small boy, though he was a man of such vast learning. On the previous night, they had celebrated at the Math the worship of Sri Shyama. This evening they would have the Visarjan, which consists in taking leave of the Mother Shyama and consigning Her image into the Ganga. In the morning Vijnan Maharaj was sitting in his room, and there were present before him Swami Kamaleswarananda (Lalit Maharaj) and a few other Sannyasins. Kamaleswarananda was erudite and well versed in the scriptures. He had established a Vedic school at the Gadadhar Ashrama in Bhawanipur, Calcutta, and was running it with a few Pandits versed in the Vedas and the Vedanta. As we entered the room of Vijnan Maharaj, we heard that he was discussing about the Bija Mantras of Gods and Goddesses, and was explaining why they were different. As far as I remember, I heard him asking Lalit Maharaj, "Well, do you know why the Bija *aim* has been joined to the Mantra for Siva? The meaning of the Bija *aim* is infinite, vast like the Akasa. Siva also is like that. That is why the '*aim* Bija' has been attached to his Mantra." Thus after various topics, the talk turned to Kali Puja. Revered Vijnan Maharaj said: "The meaning of Avahana (invocation) in the worship is nothing but this—the Kulakundalini which lies dormant in us, has to be awakened and

then established in the 'jar of the heart'. Then the worshipper, after purifying his body, etc., becomes a God or a Goddess and transfers that power from the heart to the 'Ghata', the jar placed before him at the place of worship. After this worship is finished that Power has to be gradually transferred from the image to the Ghata outside, and then back to the 'jar of the heart'. This is called Visarjana. The consigning of the image done in ceremonial worship is nothing but this. It is because we cannot always visualise Him within us in the heart, that the worship of the Deity with the help of an outer symbol becomes necessary." We were very much enlightened that day by his learned exposition, wherein he showed the unique harmony between the Vedanta and the Tantra.

But in the evening we saw another side of him . When the time for the Visarjan ceremony came, the image of the Goddess was brought out from the place where She had been worshipped, and placed near the embankment of the Ganga for the immersion ceremony. The Sannyasins started singing Bhajans before the image to bid Her farewell. Sri Maharaj-ji was then present at the Math. He along with Mahapurush Maharaj and a few others was sitting nearby on a bench, listening to the songs and having a *darshan* of the image of the Mother, when Vijnan Maharaj joined them. As soon as Maharaj-ji saw him, he said to him, "Payson, the Mother is going away. Go and whisper in her ears, asking Her to come again." Hearing this, Vijnan Maharaj, from whom we had heard such a wonderful exposition of the Vedanta and the Tantra in the morning at once went to the image, and placing his lips close to one of the ears of the image, whispered something, came back and told Sri Maharaj-ji, "Maharaj-ji, I have done your bidding." At this, Maharaj-ji asked him, "What did you tell Her, Payson?" Vijnan Maharaj replied like a child, "I said to Her, 'Mother, come again'."

Perhaps it will not be out of place if I narrate here another incident depicting his wonderful child-like nature. At that time revered Vijnan Maharaj would not come down to wash his face and hands at night, but would do the washing standing in the verandah in front of Swamiji's room. Through the munificence of a devotee, we had then a few metal

plates to take our food on. Before this we had to take food on *Sal* leaves. After the metal plates were secured we used to take them after every meal to the Ganga to clean. As we negotiated the flight of steps to the Ganga for this purpose every night, we were intrigued to see some dirty water on them and were naturally curious to find out who was spilling it. One night as we were getting down to clean the plates, we noticed some water falling on the steps from above. At this Jyotirmayanada, known familiarly as Fair Jyotish, to distinguish him from the darker one of the same name, shouted saying, "Who is throwing the water? Who is throwing the water?" Not getting any reply, he asked one of us to hold his plate and ran up still shouting. He found nobody there, and so came back to us. The next morning when we went to the revered Vijnan Maharaj to make our usual morning salutations, he told us with eyes wide open like that of a frightened child, "Do you know, brothers, what happened last night?" With anxious expectation we asked what it was. With a still more frightened look he replied, "Well, don't you know that every night I wash my face and hands sitting in this verandah. Last night also I was doing the same, when Fair Jyotish ran up with murder in his eyes, shouting, 'Who is throwing water? Who is throwing water?' At this I quickly came into my room, closed the door and lay down on the bed. With great relief I said to myself, 'Thank the Lord! he has gone away not finding anybody.' Thereupon we asked him, "Well, Maharaj, why did you not tell him that it was you who had thrown the water?" At this, like a frightened child, he started saying, "Well, you don't know, brothers! The way he was running up threatening vengeance put me to great fright. He might have even attacked me." We could not help laughing at this childish yet seriously entertained expression of fright in this wise man's face, and thought how true the Lord had spoken when he said of such persons, "Though a knower of Brahman, he plays about like a small boy."

I have already narrated how firm and unique was his faith in Sri Maharaj-ji. One day, when asked about how he looked upon Swamiji, he said, "Ah me, whoever dared to go before him! We used to make prostrations to him from a distance. Just as you feel the heat of the fire when you approach it, we used to feel likewise when we went to him."

Just as you make prostrations to Maharaj-ji approaching him from behind, I did like that sometimes to Swamiji. If he were present at the Math, one could feel it even from that gate. The whole Math would then be surcharged with his aura. Again, if he was not there, the Math would present a different atmosphere.”

Another day when I mentioned about a certain incident of the past, and asked him some questions about it, I could realise how unique his relationship with Swamiji was. I had heard that when the construction of the embankment and the flight of steps at the shore of the Ganges adjacent to this Math building was over, it was found that it far exceeded the estimate made by the revered Vijnan Maharaj. Swamiji scolded Sri Maharaj-ji very much for this, as he was responsible for the works. So Maharaj-ji with tears in his eyes said to Vijnan Maharaj, “Payson, look at this! It was because of you that I have had to hear so much scolding from Swamiji.” When I asked revered Vijnan Maharaj about the truth of this, he said, “Yes, brother, it is true.” Filled with wonder, we asked him again, “Maharaj, you must have made many estimates in the past. Then how is it that you made such a mistake now?” He had actually given an estimate of Rs. 800 only for it. But when Swamiji called for the actual expenses from Maharaj-ji, it had already ran up to Rs. 1,500 and the work was only half complete. Vijnan Maharaj’s reply to this was: “What do you know, brother? If I had given a bigger estimate, he would never have allowed the work to be taken up at all!”

I think that it was a little after this that to escape another scolding from Swamiji, Vijnan Maharaj decided to slip away quietly to Calcutta to stay at Balaram Babu’s house with Sri Maharaj-ji for some time. With this object in view, he called a passing boat, and as he was getting into it, Swamiji saw him from above and shouted out to him, “Payson, don’t go, don’t go to Raja (Maharaj-ji). He is not a very good person!” “But,” continued Vijnan Maharaj, “was I the man to pay heed to it ? I got into the boat and took my seat underneath the roof of the boat.” One could realise the charming sublimity of these small incidents in the relationship between these great disciples of Sri Thakur only when they

are seen against the background of their majestic stature as men of the highest spiritual illumination.

He used to say, “Swamiji is still in that room of his. That is why, when passing by that room, I do so with great care, so that I do not cause any disturbance to his meditation. When he was living in his body, I had once seen him meditating in that room. At that time I was wonder-struck to find the whole room lighted with the radiance emanating from his body. Was he an ordinary man!”

About the construction of the present Temple of Sri Thakur at the Belur Math, Vijnan Maharaj told us, “Swamiji all of a sudden sent for me one day, and said, ‘Well, Payson, we have to draw a plan for the Shrine of Sri Thakur. Just as Sri Thakur was the personification of all the religions, his Temple also should depict the beauties of all the styles of architecture—Greek, Roman, Saracenic, Hindu, etc. You better prepare a plan according to this idea.’ Saying this, Swamiji told me many things about the beauties of the different styles of architecture of different lands. I don’t know how much of it I understood. Nevertheless at his bidding I laboured at it for several days, produced a sort of a drawing, and presented it myself before Swamiji. He went over the plan and said, ‘It is nice.’”

Years after, when the construction work of the new Temple of Sri Thakur was taken up, Vijnan Maharaj had to shift the foundation stone laid before by revered Mahapurush Maharaj, and lay it again at the base of the ‘present Temple-to-be.’ I was fortunate to be present near him at this function. I saw him looking up and saying with an emotion-choked voice, “Swamiji, you had said, ‘Payson, when the Temple of Sri Thakur will be constructed, I may not be present in this body of mine, but nevertheless, I shall witness it from a subtle plane.’ So please do so, now that its foundation stone is being laid.” With this request, the ceremony was over. He then went straight to his room with tear-filled eyes, closed the door, and lay flat on the bed. A few days after this, I asked him, “Maharaj, did you really have a *Darshan* of Swamiji that day?” In answer he said, “Yes, brother. Why of Swamiji alone! Even of Sri Thakur, of the

Holy Mother, Sri Maharaj-ji and others too! They were present and blessed us. It is with their blessings that I have started the work."

When one day we asked him about the divine visions he had experienced, he said, "Yes, brothers, I have had some. But Maharaj-ji had many more." Saying this, as if belittling visions, he added in a jocular voice, "But do you know the mystery of it all! My brain gets heated, and Maharaj-ji's all the more!" How many were the deep divine truths that he had thus told us about, jokingly! Those unique qualities which went to make up his pure and high life, were found reflected more or less in the lives of those who had the good fortune of being blessed with close association with him. In this connection, I find it incumbent upon me to say something about Beni, his main attendant. Beni was the son of poor parents. He lost his father in his infancy. Driven by poverty he had come, when a mere boy, to revered Vijnan Maharaj and offered his services to him. But the latter did not accept him as a mere servant boy. From the very start he had drawn Beni close to him as a son, with his love. Soon it came to pass that no work of his would be completed unless Beni was there. Sometimes, he would scold him very much, and at some others, he would affectionately call him —'Beni Babu.' Nobody else had the privilege of rendering personal service to him. When he was very sick at the Belur Math, it was found that he was not much pleased with the service rendered to him by the Sannyasins there. Under his instruction, a telegram was sent to Allahabad and Beni was brought from there. When Beni took charge of his service, his mind was at rest.

When he understood that his body would not be on this earth much longer, revered Vijnan. Maharaj called Beni and said to him, "Beni, I want to keep some money in your name. Otherwise when my body goes, you may have to face some difficulties for your up-keep." For an unmarried young man of 34 or 35 belonging to a very poor family, Beni's reply to this proposal was remarkable. With folded palms he said, "Maharaj, through your grace, all my desires have been fulfilled. I do not want anything else from you. Only please bless me that I may have an unshakable devotion for Sri Thakur." The inmates of the

Allahabad Ashrama say that at this, Vijnan Maharaj placed his hand on Beni's head and said, "Beni, if these hands have been of any service to Sri Thakur, then my blessing to you is that you will have unshakable faith and devotion to his feet."

After revered Vijnan Maharaj left his body in April 1938, I happened to go to the Allahabad Ashrama. There I found that many of his relations were coming and cajoling Beni to return home and marry. It may be that they were under the impression that, when the revered Vijnan Maharaj depended upon him so much, he must have made a substantial provision for Beni, and that for his devoted service so long, the Ashrama also would reward him sumptuously. However that may be, Beni remained adamant, and did not listen to their words. He simply said, "Maharaj has left me here, and here it will be that I breathe my last."

About two years after this, Beni got seriously ill. Revered Sankarananda Maharaj was then at the Kashi Sevashrama. He loved Beni very much, and again and again he wrote to the then Head of the Allahabad Ashrama to send Beni to Varanasi. For it was easy at the Sevashrama there to give proper treatment to him. But Beni remained firm in his determination. He only said humbly, "I came to this Ashrama of Maharaj at a very tender age, and have since grown up in his love. Please be gracious to me and do not try to remove me from here. I will never leave this Ashrama." Hearing this, Sankarananda Maharaj decided to go to Allahabad himself and bring him over. Beni heard of this, and came to know that Sankaranandaji was arriving at Allahabad for the purpose on such and such a date. Strangely enough, due to mere coincidence or due to some very profound reason, Beni also left his body that very day in full consciousness. Thus was base iron transformed into shining gold by the contact of a true philosopher's stone. Such is the great glory of 'keeping the company of a really holy man'.

Sri Thakur had given to Vijnan Maharaj two invaluable instructions, which the latter had followed to the very letter, right up to his last day. The first one of these was, "When you practise meditation, you must do



it completely naked, free from any kind of bondage.” That was why immediately after the night meal, I found him closing the door and lying on his bed. I thought that to be a habit of his. At that time I used to sleep at night in the ‘Swamiji’s verandah’, which was adjacent to his room. Sometimes, when I woke up suddenly at night, I used to see him completely naked, going by us towards the roof to wash his face and hands. I did not then understand the reason for his being thus completely naked. Later on I heard that it was at the bidding of Sri Thakur that he was so, even when he meditated lying on his bed.

The other instruction of Sri Thakur was, “Even if a woman, pure as gold, rolls on the ground in great devotion, do not ever turn your eyes on her.” This too he had followed rigidly, till he became the President of the Math. A little before this, when he visited Mahapurush Maharaj for the last time, he saw the latter even after he had lost his voice, giving initiation just by raising his left hand, and blessing everybody that came to him. This sight completely changed his way of thinking. He used to say, “I feel as if that large-hearted attitude of Mahapurush Maharaj forced its way into me.” From that time he used to initiate all, men and women alike. It may be that he received Thakur’s command too in this respect. Before this, no woman could get an entry into his Ashrama at Allahabad. A brother disciple of his used to say jokingly, “Even a female fly cannot get into Vijnan Maharaj’s Ashrama.”

When he was conducting the construction work of Swamiji’s Mandir, I had taken a certain devoted lady to make salutation to him. Sri Maharaj-ji had a great affection for her. As soon as the lady made prostration, Vijnan Maharaj turned round and went away. When the lady lifted her head up after prostration, she was very much surprised to see him going away. I also could not understand the reason of his doing so. It was later that I came to know that he had done so, in obedience to the bidding of Sri Thakur. Seeing his unique discipline, steadfastness and unshakable devotion to Sri Thakur in his behaviour, side by side with his profound learning, devotion and childlike simplicity, we were filled with a great admiration for him.

In his ordinary behaviour with people, he would never observe formalities. Perhaps he was having a religious discourse with a room full of people, and the latter were listening to it with great eagerness, when his mood changed. He would then all at once tell them, “Well, then, now you may take your leave.” Saying this, he would just close the door before them. Such peculiar, child-like behaviour of his, so different from that of persons like us, would seem queer and eccentric, but if we ponder over it, we would find some deep significance in it.

Even when he had become the President of the Math, I had observed these peculiar ways of his. The devotees used to bring various kinds of sweets for him. When we went to make our salutations to him, he would distribute them amongst us very joyfully. Again, there were occasions when large quantities of sweets, etc., accumulated, but he would say to his attendants, “Don’t give it to anybody today. Keep it all for me.” Next day perhaps all of it would turn bad and would be thrown into the Ganga.

From the time that he started giving initiations, the devotees would give him as Guru Dakshina (offering given to a preceptor) many pieces of cloth, etc. Sometimes he would distribute them all amongst the Sannyasins of the Math. Again, on some other occasions he would say, “Not even a single piece will be given to anybody. I shall take them all to Allahabad.” If perhaps his attendants asked him, “Maharaj, what will you do with so many pieces of cloth there?” His answer would be, “Oh, they will be of use in my Bhandara’<sup>1</sup>” Thus he once took two boxfuls of cloth to Allahabad. When after some time he left his body, these pieces of cloth were actually used in his Bhandara for distribution amongst the Synnyasins who attended the function.

Such were the instances of his peculiar behaviour, which to our eyes appeared to be ‘like that of a child’ ‘like that of madcap’, etc. The meaning of the above mentioned adjectives, applied in the *Srimad Bhagavata* to a Paramahansa’s behaviour, was brought home to me through my association with Swami Vijnananandaji Maharaj. I consider myself blessed indeed by this.

1. The reference is to the Bhandara or feast given to Sadhus on the thirteenth day after the passing away of a respected Sannyasin-Clothes and monetary presents too are distributed among the participants.

## CHAPTER VIII

## SWAMI AKHANDANANDA (1864-1937)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Swami Akhandananda was the third President of the Ramakrishna Math and the Mission from 1932, in succession to Swami Shivananda. Known as Gangadhar in his boyhood, he was blessed enough to come within the close circle of Sri Ramakrishna's devotees in 1883 at the young age of nineteen. Given to rigidly orthodox ways of life, his spiritual genius got on the right track under the Great Master's instruction. After the Master's lifetime, he took to holy wanderings to various places of pilgrimage, and even crossed over to Tibet three times. He moved about extensively in India, mostly on foot, in the Northern regions, Rajputana, Gujarat and Bengal. He was a pioneer in organising educational and relief work, which became in later days the distinguishing feature of the Ramakrishna Order of monks. In fact he began such work even before Swami Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission. Though devoted entirely to meditation and austere living in his early days, his wanderings in Gujarat and Rajputana brought him face to face with the poverty and ignorance of the people, which he has so vividly portrayed in his reminiscences. It made him take the vow of service, and thenceforth wherever he went, he tried to organise schools, service associations and relief centres. His efforts in this direction culminated in the Ramakrishna Mission relief operations of 1897 at Mahula, lasting for a year, and in the founding of the orphanage at Sargachi, where the Swami stayed in the midst of his orphans even after he became the President. In many of the relief operations organised by the Mission afterwards, too, including the relief operation connected with the great Bihar earthquake, he played an important part. His motto in life was the famous verse of Ranti Deva in the *Bhagavata*: "I do not want an earthly kingdom, or heaven, or even salvation. The only thing I desire is the removal of the miseries of the afflicted." The reminiscences of his travels and his wide public contacts have been published in English under the title *From Holy Wanderings to Service of God in Man*.

Swami Akhandanandaji Maharaj, familiarly known by his pre-monastic name as Gangadhar Maharaj, was one of those disciples of Sri Thakur, with whom I had the good fortune of coming in contact. At the time of my joining the Math, he was busy at Sargachhi (Murshidabad) conducting his orphanage. I used to hear even then about his broad heart and capacity for work. I had heard that it was virtually under divine command that he had established that little Ashrama. A few orphan boys lived there. He was their father, mother, friend and companion. That Ashrama was the first of its kind in the Mission, based on the ideal of Sri Swamiji's Karma Yoga. As a wandering monk, he had been to various parts of India and even to Tibet. Wherever he went, he felt very much for the sad plight of the poor and the destitute, and always did his best to ameliorate their condition with the help of the local people, even sometimes at the risk of his own life. Thus at the Yuke Math in Tibet, seeing the state of splendour of the Lamas there,

side by side with the abject condition of the common people, who were in want of food, clothing and the bare necessities of life, he requested the Lamas to help these poor people a little. The Lamas got infuriated at this and wanted to cut away his jaws, so that he would not be able to speak again. But before they could put their cruel plan into action, he came to know of it and escaped from the place at once.

My friend Swami Jnanananda (Neelkantha Maharaj) tells me of an incident. He was then a worker at the Malda Ramakrishna Ashrama. A famine was raging in that locality and many people were dying of starvation. One evening just before dusk, a Muslim gentleman came to the Ashrama carrying a baby. After conversing with the inmates a little, he just placed the baby at a corner of the room and was going away. Seeing this, Neelkantha Maharaj stopped him and asked him the meaning of his action. The gentleman replied, "The baby is the offspring of a cobbler. When both its parents died of starvation, I started looking after it. But now for various reasons, I find it impossible to bear this responsibility. As this Ashrama is helping the poor in every way, I thought that proper care would be taken of this orphan child too, and so I am leaving him here." Neelkantha Maharaj found himself now in a great fix. After deliberating over it, he sent a letter to revered Gangadhar Maharaj at Sargachhi. The answer came by return of post. It conveyed the instruction: "Bring the child to me at once. I shall try to take care of him." Within a few days Neelkantha Maharaj went to Sargachhi. The moment his eyes fell on the child, revered Gangadhar Maharaj took him up on his lap and started fondling him. So leaving the baby with the Maharaj, Neelkantha Maharaj returned to Malda. A few years later, on his way from Malda to Belur Math, Neelkantha Maharaj broke his journey at Sargachhi. Seeing him from a distance, revered Gangadhar Maharaj came to him carrying the child and said joyfully, "See how big the baby you brought has grown." He found that the child was really happy and looked well. A few years after this, he again broke his journey at Sargachhi. Seeing him, revered Akhandanandaji burst into tears and said, "Neelkantha, I could not save the child. In spite of all my efforts, he passed away recently." Seeing the Maharaj in such an anguish, Neelkantha Maharaj said consoling him... Maharaj, what of

that? He was the son of a poor cobbler. After the death of his parents, a Muslim took care of him. Then due to his good fortune, he somehow came under your loving care. You are one of the eternal companions of Sri Thakur and the present Vice-President of the Math and the Mission. Where else would such a fortunate child go, than to the lap of Sri Thakur himself?" Hearing this, the revered Maharaj was pacified like a simple child and said, "You have indeed said the right thing. He must have gone to Sri Thakur himself." Such was his magnanimous heart and childlike simplicity.

We were blessed to witness many instances of his art-lessness. Whenever he came to the Math, he would be very eager to return to Sargachhi, after staying only for a few days at the Math. At this Sri Maharaj-ji (Swami Brahmananda) would say very gravely, "Why should you go back there, Ganga (short endearing term for Gangadhar) ? There you have as your companions only some naked boys—discarded by their parents. But here, how many Sadhus and Brahmacharins there are for you to live with! Why don't you stay with them and give them instructions?" Not understanding the joke, Gangadhar Maharaj would be flabbergasted and would say very earnestly, "No, no, Maharaj-ji. You do not understand the position. If I don't go, the children will be in great difficulty." At this Sri Maharaj-ji would repeat the argument and Gangadhar Maharaj would be more perturbed. Then, after securing a promise from him to return to the Math soon, Sri Maharaj-ji would allow him to go.

The way Sri Maharaj-ji played a joke on him at Kothar, Orissa (estate of the family of Balaram Babu) is well known to many who belong to the Ramakrishna Order. Even then I hope to be pardoned if I repeat this incident, as it shows the intimate and sweet relationship that existed between the two brothers. Most probably it was to recoup their health that the two brothers had gone there. After staying there for some time, revered Gangadhar Maharaj, as usual, became eager to return to Sargachhi. Seeing his engerness, Sri Maharaj-ji, who was so full of fun, thought of a way to pull his leg. After consulting the Almanac, a day was fixed for the departure of Gangadhar Maharaj. At the appointed time a

palanquin was kept ready to take him to the railway station. In the meantime Sri Maharaj-ji had a quiet talk with the bearers of the palanquin. The railway station being quite far from the place, revered Gangadhar Maharaj got into the palanquin in the middle of the night and the bearers started. Soon, because of the rhythmic joltings of the palanquin and the 'hey-hos' of the bearers, the Swamiji fell asleep. The bearers, however, continued their march. After travelling throughout the rest of the night, they at last came to a halt and lowered the palanquin from their shoulders on to the ground. It was just dawn then. Gangadhar Maharaj woke up, thinking that they had reached the precincts of the railway station. As he opened the flap and came out of the palanquin, he found to his great surprise Sri Maharaj-ji standing in front of him. The latter asked him with a show of great astonishment, "Well Ganga, what is this! What brings you back?" It was then that Gangadhar Maharaj understood how a joke had been played on him—that instead of going to the railway station, he had been going round and round, and that the bearers had ultimately brought him back to the very starting point!

Many were the occasions when Sri Maharaj-ji and his other brother-disciples would thus have fun with him. On such occasions we would be charmed to witness his utter simplicity. We knew how to make him give up a proposed journey of his. When he would be about to start to Sargachhi, some of us would tell him, "Maharaj, please narrate to us once again the incidents connected with your journey to Tibet." Immediately the godly and innocent old man would sit down and tell us hour after hour, the breathtaking tales of his travels. He would then completely forget that it was getting late for the train and that a carriage was waiting to take him to the railway station. Ultimately when, after finishing the narration, he went to the station, he would find that the train had left long before. He would thus miss trains several times, and the devotees would be happy in keeping him in their midst for longer periods.

I had the good fortune to be associated with one such incident. Most probably it happened in either 1921 or 1922. Revered Abhedanandaji



Maharaj had returned from America and was then staying for a few days at Balaram Babu's house (Balaram Mandir) in Bagbazar. I was also there as his Sevaka. One day the revered Gangadhar Maharaj also came there to meet him. It happened that just then Swami Vishuddhanandaji (Jiten Maharaj) and Nirvananandaji arrived there on some work. As they met Gangadhar Maharaj, they told him, "Maharaj, we have got you with us after a long time. You have to do us the favour of playing cards with us today. It is long since we played last." At first he said "No" to it, but later on agreed to do so. But where were they to get the fourth partner ? Seeing me there, he lovingly called me near him and said, "Come, join us. You better be my partner. Let them play against us." In spite of my saying again and again, "Maharaj, it was in my boyhood days that I played a little, but now I have completely forgotten it," he would not let me go. The result was as expected. We lost game after game, and every time he would say, "Well, I see, he knows nothing", and my humble answer would be, "I told you so, Maharaj." At last we lost the whole game hopelessly. Just at that time, a devotee came and he said, "Well, let him take your place now." I heaved a sigh of relief. But as I was slipping away, the Maharaj beckoned me and said, "Please don't go away. Rather sit behind me, and advise me when to play what card." This time, too, we lost hopelessly, and again he said, "I see, the youngster knows nothing about the game." Such was his childlike simplicity, which endeared him to us.

It happened another day that Sri Mahapurush Maharaj was very ill. He was suffering much from asthma. The different centres of the Mission had been informed about this. As soon as he came to know about it, the revered Gangadhar Maharaj came to the Math, went to the room of Sri Mahapurush Maharaj, and said with eyes filled with tears, "Brother, brother, I am shocked to see you in this state of health! Who will be our guide in life if you leave us?" Revered Mahapurush Maharaj knew his nature well, and so he slowly said, "Come, come, tell us how things are with you at your place." At this Gangadhar Maharaj started narrating about his cultivation, etc., at Sargachhi. He said, "Well, brother, what shall I say? Patal (a vegetable) grew so much this year that we expected a yield of several maunds of it. To guard against these

being stolen, we built a thatched enclosure at the centre of the plot, and soon the plants began to wither. Brother, how could the plants bear to have an enclosure built at their very heart!" The brother addressed to also agreed saying, "Well, how could they!" We all enjoyed this scene of innocent simplicity that the brothers presented.

I did not understand that along with this childlike simplicity of his, he had a great foresightedness and a heartfelt desire for the well-being of the country. But later on, seeing the fulfilment of his words, the truth of this was brought home to me. I give here a couple of such incidents.

One day he returned to the Math panting, and said to us, "Listen, today I went on foot to the house of Suren Babu (Sir Surendranath Banerji) at Barrakpore. There I could meet him with great difficulty. I told him, 'Why are you running the Congress this way? If you really have the good of the country at heart, you have to go to the village, where you have thousands and thousands of villagers, who know nothing about you. You are having your deliberations of the Congress in the cities and towns only. Of what good is it to those illiterate countrymen of ours ? Why don't you hold your Congress sessions in the village ? Why do you bring your Congress President in a big carriage and with such pomp to the rostrum in your Congress session ? Be one with the poor villagers. Hold your Congress session in the village, and bring your President there in a bullock cart, so that the villagers know that it is their Congress, and that the President is their very 'own'". What Sri Surendranath said in reply, we do not know. But a few years later, when Mahatma Gandhi was at the helm of the agitation, the session of the Congress was actually held in a village, and they did carry the President in procession in a bullock cart.

Another day he came back to the Math panting in the same way, and said, "Just listen, today I went to the house of Ashu Babu (Sir Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay, who was then the Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University). There I found his room full of books, arranged in rows. Most of these were in English. After waiting there for a long time, when I met him, I told him, 'Now that you are at the helm of the University, why do you not make Sanskrit more popular ? Sanskrit is really the

backbone of the nation.” We do not know how far Ashu Babu had realised the truth of the statement. But when a few years later we read Lord Ronaldshay’s newly published book, *The Heart of Aryavarta*, we were wonderstruck to find that the words of the ‘old man’ were being fulfilled. Ronaldshay had written: “If Lord Macaulay had come to Calcutta today and seen the Calcutta University, he would have understood that, that language (Sanskrit), which he had derisively dubbed as ‘dead’, and about which he had remarked that ‘if all the books in that language were collected at one place, they could all be accommodated in a single almirah of any of our libraries’, is now the medium of instruction in twelve different departments of the University?”

So who can say in how many ways the message of Sri Thakur had been propagated by his disciples silently, unknown to the public gaze ? We had only seen what they were like, from the outside. Where have we the ability to get into the heart of things ? Our prayer to Thakur is “May He bestow on us this insight!”

## CHAPTER IX

## SWAMI SUBODHANANDA (1867-1932)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Swami Subodhananda, called by his pet name of Khoka Maharaj, meaning 'Boy', came to Sri Ramakrishna in 1884, and joined the group of young men who were later organised into the Ramakrishna Order of monks by Swami Vivekananda. The pet name 'Khoka' was given to him by Swami Vivekananda because of the very simple and boyish nature which he maintained to the last. By his simple and exemplary life of piety, he helped to mould the life of many a young man. Most of his time was spent in the Belur Math. He passed away in 1932.

For two and a half years after joining the Order, I had the good fortune of staying at the Belur Math. During this period I used to live near revered Khoka Maharaj, as Subodhanandaji was familiarly known. The library and the office of the Math were both lodged in the big room to the west of Swamiji's room. I had to do some work in the office as well as in the library. Thus most of my time was spent in the upper storey near Khoka Maharaj's room. At night, due to the paucity of space on the ground floor, I had to sleep in the small verandah between Swamiji's room and that of Khoka Maharaj. But even though staying so close to him, I did not then find any speciality or greatness in him. He was really like a 'Khoka', a small boy. He used to take his meal with us in the common dining hall and he behaved like an ordinary Sannyasin in all respects. He used to wear a small shirt and a small piece of cloth (Dhoti), and would wash them himself. He did not then have any attendant. Sometimes he would call one of us and would dictate his letters. But he was always careful to see that no inconvenience was caused to Mahapurush Maharaj in the next room, and so he would do the dictation in a low voice. If perchance during this period revered Mahapurush Maharaj called us, he would at once stop the dictation and ask us to go to him. He used to smoke, but we had never seen him doing so before the revered Mahapurush Maharaj. In his behaviour with revered Mahapurush Maharaj, he was like a small boy. One day a few devotees come from Dacca to take the revered Mahapurush Maharaj with them to their place, if he would kindly agree to it. As his health was bad, the revered Mahapurushji was not able to do so, and so he came to the revered Khoka Maharaj's room and said, "Khoka, these devotees have come from Dacca to take me there. But as my health is bad, why

don't you go instead?" At this Khoka Maharaj replied with his eyes wide open, "No, no, I am not going there. To go to that side, we have to cross so many big rivers, which frightens me very much." Revered Mahapurush Maharaj, understanding Khoka Maharaj's nature, did not press the point.

But two or three years later, he had perforce to go to Dacca. They were celebrating the installation of Sri Thakur's image at the Ramakrishna Ashrama of the Baliyati village in Dacca. For this, and for sanctifying the residence of the late Jamini Ray, the Zamindar of the place, the revered Khoka Maharaj had to go to the Dacca Ramakrishna Ashrama with a few Sannyasins accompanying him. At that time we were workers at the Dacca Ashrama. It was then that we came to understand some-thing of the real greatness of Khoka Maharaj and to feel blessed thereby. After a few days at the Dacca Ashrama, he started for Baliyati for the installation ceremony, taking with him a few of us monastics and devotees. It was Jamini Babu who had made all the arrangements for our journey. It was arranged that we should be going up to Manickgunj by steamer. Midway we would be taking rest and spending the night at his warehouse. We were eight or ten in the party. The place was small. For our sleep, a big duree (a sort of carpet) was spread, and on it we opened our small beddings and went to sleep. My bedding was spread next to that of the Maharaj. I was the youngest of the party. The others, being older, hesitated to lie down so close to him. When I woke up at 4 o'clock in the morning, I found the Maharaj sitting up on his bed in deep meditation. I also soon got into that posture on my bed and felt what deep meditation really means. The company of a saint even for a short while may be the means of our getting across the ocean of the world.

At Baliyati we stayed for a few days. It was a growing village where quite a number of Zamindars resided. Factious quarrels in connection with their landed interests, were quite common among them. But at the coming of the Maharaj, they patched up their differences. Sri Thakur was duly installed at the Ashrama. Its Manager, Radhika Mohan Adhikari, joined the Math sometime later and took Sannyasa under the

name of Swami Sundarananda. Afterwards, he was the editor of the Udbodhan for a long time.

After returning to Dacca, Khoka Maharaj stayed with us and narrated to us every day the austerities that he had practised and the tales of his various pilgrimages. He would also give us various instructions to make us better Sannyasins. At this time, he told us many things about Girish Babu. He used to say that Girish Babu was a man of real faith, and that he had truly understood what Sri Thakur really was. Girish Babu would say “Well, what did Chaitanya do? He simply emancipated the two sinners, Jagai and Madhai. But these two are nothing in comparison to me —they represent only a half of my sinful life. Considering what I was seven cubits of earth round the spot I sat on would become impure; so sinful I was. From that, to what a great height Sri Thakur has raised me! So if I do not call him an Incarnation, whom else can I do so?”

One day, about meditation and Japa, the Maharaj said, “Listen, unless you yourself practise meditation and Japa, it does not matter how great the Guru from whom you took your initiation might be, you cannot have success.” In this connection he said, “You see, I was practising austerities (Tapasya) with revered Maharaj-ji at Kusum Sarovar in Vrindavan. But you know my habit of taking tea, acquired from my very childhood. That was why as soon as the day dawned, I would present myself at Goswamiji’s (Vijay Krishna Goswami) Ashram with a coconut shell (for a cup) in my hand, and have my tea there. After that I would return to the Kusum Sarovar. Sri Maharaj-ji had noticed this absence of mine. One day he called me to him and said, ‘Khoka,, I thought you had come here for practising austerities. Then why are you anxious to go out so early in the morning?’

“In reply I told him, ‘Maharaj-ji Sri Thakur gave us everything. Then where is the necessity for this Tapasya?’ At this Maharaj-ji became very grave, and after a while he said, ‘It is indeed true, Khoka, that he gave us everything. But along with it he asked us to realise it by Japa and meditation.’ That is why I tell you that it doesn’t matter what kind of initiation you have got and from whom, you must try your best by Japa

and meditation to 'awaken the Mantra', and make it yield to you realisation. Merely sitting idle will not do." In reply we would sometimes tell him, "Maharaj, we get tired doing the works of the Math and the Mission throughout the whole day. That is why we cannot get up early and sit for Japa and meditation regularly. And again, we may have to go out early for the work allotted to us by the authorities." In reply to this he would say, "Do not eat much at night, and when you go to bed, drive away from your mind all thoughts of your work. Then you will get deep sleep and will feel no lethargy when you get up in the morning."

Both in the day as well as in the night, the quantity of food that he used to take was very little. If some devotee invited him, the first question he would put to him would be, "What will you give me to eat?" Perhaps the devotee, showing his humility, would say, "What else can we feed you with ? We shall only place before you some 'dal and rice'." He would then go to him at the appointed time and sit down for his meal. And even if there were many delicacies served to him, he would not touch them at all, and would only have 'dal and rice'. However much the devotee might entreat him, he would not have anything else. He used to say, "We must stick to truth in words also. This is what Sri Thakur taught us."

All this happened in 1925. The next year he again came to the Dacca Math with a few monastics. Some days later, with a few of us from the Dacca Math and the above mentioned visiting monastics, he started for Sonargan to install Sri Thakur at the local Ramakrishna Ashrama. On the auspicious Akshaya-tritiya day, he performed this ceremony. In the evening they held a meeting there and the revered Maharaj took the chair. As far as I remember, the speakers gave fine speeches explaining how Sri Thakur's image was an image of all the religions, and the audience appreciated it very much. After that, they all took Prasada—Hindus and Muslims alike.

For five or six years after this, we did not meet him at all, as we had been busy at various places with the work of the Math and the Mission. Revered Khoka Maharaj, too, suffered from a break-down in health after



returning from Sonargan, and he went to places like Varanasi, Bhuvaneswar, etc., to recoup it. We met him for the last time, most probably in the middle of 1932. Then he had fallen a victim to phthisis, and there were always two attendants looking after him. He then occupied the room above the present office building. His attendants and the other monastics of the Math nursed him very well. Even in this suffering he had always a smile on his face. As we had gone to him from a far off place, he asked about our welfare very minutely. Whenever we asked him how he was, he would reply, "I am as Sri Thakur has been pleased to keep me."

A few days after this, he left his body. From what his attendant monastics told us about his passing, we feel that he was really the 'eternal *Khoka* (boy) of Sri Thakur'. They told us: "From the beginning of his illness the revered Mahapurush Maharaj would always keep enquiring about him, and from time to time he would himself come up to his room to find out how he was keeping. But the day he left his body, the revered Mahapurush Maharaj had a severe attack of asthma and he could not come up to see him. So *Khoka* Maharaj was again and again asking about him. When he was told that because of his illness it was not possible for the revered Mahapurushji to come to him that day, he felt a little disappointed and said to himself, 'Would that he had come once!'" Immediately after saying this, he moved his body in such a way as if he was trying to catch somebody, who was thwarting him and running away. This game of 'hide and seek' ended at last in his being able to catch the object of his chase. There was a wide smile of satisfaction on his face, and the hair on the whole of his body suddenly stood on end. Soon after, he entered into Mahasamadhi. The 'kid' of Sri

Thakur went to Sri Thakur Himself. The play of 'hide and seek' had come to an end. May this '*Khoka*' shower his benediction on us, is my earnest prayer.

## CHAPTER X

## SWAMI ADBHUTANANDA

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Unlike the other monastic disciples of the Great Master, Swami Adbhutananda, also known as Latu Maharaj after his original name Rakhtu Ram, was a person of very humble origin and no education. He came from a shepherd family of Behar, and began life as a servant boy in the family of a devotee, Ramachandra Datta, who sent him after some time to be the personal attendant of the Great Master. He must have been only in his teens then. The dates of the events of his early life, including the date of his birth, are unknown because of the peculiar nature of the circumstances surrounding his life. Thereafter he spent all his time serving the Great Master, and in fact he was much longer than any of the other disciples in intimate contact with him. Spiritual experience gradually elevated an uneducated shepherd boy into a wise and saintly exponent of the highest teachings of Jnana and Bhakti, not in platform lectures, but in informal talks, which learned men remained to hear and feel inspired. Saintly he was but unconventional, too, and could not therefore be bound to any organisational life. He spent most of his nights not in sleep but in meditation. He moved about as the spirit directed him, not caring for his health or for his comfort, and eschewing all duties and obligations. He, however, kept his connection with the monastic Brotherhood, but in an informal way without subjecting himself to any rules. Occasionally he stayed at the Belur Math, and at other times in the establishments of devotees, like Balaram Mandir and Basumati Press. During the last years of his life (1912-1920) he stayed at Banaras in various parts of the sacred city. In 1920 he passed away. There is a valuable volume of memoirs about him, wherein he reveals many of his unique experiences with Sri Ramakrishna. It is yet to appear in English.

It was before I came to Varanasi, most probably in the year 1915, when I had gone to the Math with my friends, that I heard for the first time about the revered Latu Maharaj from a conversation of the revered Baburam Maharaj. One amongst us had then asked him, "Where is Latu Maharaj and how is he ?" In reply to this, he said in an excited voice characteristic of him, "He is now at Varanasi. Why don't you go and see him once ? You will see how, through the grace of Sri Thakur, words of the Veda and the Vedanta are coming out of the lips of this illiterate Sannyasin."

After this when I came to Varanasi in 1919, I did not have the good fortune of coming in close contact with the revered Latu Maharaj. Only once I had the privilege of meeting him. Then I used to live in Varanasi away from the Ashrama, and came to the revered Hari Maharaj every day. He was sowing the seed of renunciation slowly in my heart. Some of those with whom I used to go to him, would almost daily go to the revered Latu Maharaj also. They often asked me to accompany them.

But my mind would not allow me to go anywhere else, leaving the company of the revered Hari Maharaj. In the end, owing to the compulsion of these friends of mine, I had to present myself before the revered Latu Maharaj. He then lived at Hararbagh in Varanasi. When we went to him, it was already night. I found him lying straight, covering himself wholly with a sheet of cloth and murmuring something to himself. His attendant had placed his food for the night well covered for him. A few dogs were moving about around him.

When we approached him, he simply called out, "Who are you all that have come?" and kept on in the same pose. From the attendants we learnt that it was not certain when he would take his food. It might even be at 2 o'clock in the night. But his food had to be prepared and kept ready at the right time. Sometimes he might take it early, sometimes late. If the food was not found ready there at the time he wanted, he would be displeased.

Some time after this, I had to return to Calcutta to complete my education, at the instance of the revered Hari Maharaj. By and by I received a letter from him, written in his own hand, in which he had said that the day before he wrote that letter, the revered Latu Maharaj had left his body. His passing away was wonderful, as he wrote to me. He had further added that when the body was given a bath and placed in a sitting posture, as they do with the dead body of a Sannyasin before it is taken out in a procession for cremation or immersion in Ganga, his open eyes and peaceful countenance seemed to be showering benediction on all.

When I returned to Varanasi, I heard much about the revered Latu Maharaj from the revered Hari Maharaj and others. It produced a sense of repentance in me, that I had not been to meet this unique Sannyasin more times when he was living, in spite of the opportunity I had to do so.