

Sri Sharada Devi – Paragon of Virtues

Translation of the Kannada booklet 'Sadguna Bhushite Sri Sharada Mate' by Swami Purushottamananda

Sri Sharada Devi & Viveka:

The year: 1885. Sri Sharada Devi was staying in Dakshineswar in Kolkata. That was period when she was immersed in serving her husband Sri Ramakrishna and in her own intense spiritual Sadhana. Sri Ramakrishna had decided to take his disciples and devotees with him to the famous Panihati *Chide-mahotsava*.

Situated some five miles away from Dakshineswar, Panihati hosted an annual fair called *Chide-mahotsava*. It would be better to call it a devotees' convention or devotees' extravaganza. It was a major congregation of the Vaishnava devotees. Hundreds of devotees of Lord Krishna would gather at Panihati and spend the day in chanting the Lord's name. Everyone who came there would sing and dance in the Lord's name. There would be endless *nama-sankirtana*, *bhajans* and dancing. Sri Ramakrishna had been attending that event for many years now. But he had been unable to attend that program the previous year (1884) due to unavoidable circumstances. Now, this year, he planned to attend the *Chide-mahotsava*. He was the very embodiment of bliss. One can only imagine the magical environment he would be creating in a devotees' extravaganza like the Panihati *Chide-mahotsava*. Hence, innumerable disciples and devotees also wished to accompany him there. Some lady-devotees too joined the group. Thus, it became a group of some 20-25 persons. Sri Sharada Devi too desired to be a part of that group. But, Sri Ramakrishna did not make any statement on that matter. So, Sri Sharada Devi sent a lady devotee to ask of Sri Ramakrishna if she, i.e. Sri Sharada Devi, too could accompany the group. Sri Ramakrishna, who thus learnt of his wife's wish to go to Panihati *Chide-mahotsava*, said, "If she wishes, she may come."

One may ask, 'Why? Sri Sharada Devi could have directly approached Sri Ramakrishna and asked him. Why ask through a lady-devotee?' Well, the situation there wasn't that simple. Sri Sharada Devi was extremely bashful. Sri Ramakrishna's room was always full of devotees, disciples, and the who's who of Kolkata of that period. There was no chance of Sri Sharada Devi appearing before all those people and speaking to her husband. Therefore, she sent an emissary.

Anyway, when the time for departure to Panihati arrived, some lady-devotees approached Sri Sharada Devi and asked her, "Mother, won't you come with us?" Sri Sharada Devi, endowed with a supremely subtle intellect, and blessed with phenomenal common sense said, "You see, how could I ever accompany you all? So many people are in the group. The boat will be literally full. What to say about the fair! It would be impossible for me to move about in that ocean of people. No, you all please go ahead."

Saying this, Sri Sharada Devi joyfully saw off the group of lady-devotees. The Fair went off very well. At night, when they had all returned, while having dinner, Sri Ramakrishna said, "My God! What a crowd! I was continuously in ecstasy. Everybody's eyes were planted on me. And good Lord! It was very good that she did not accompany us. If she were to be with us, those people would have made fun of us saying, 'O look! There goes the famous "Swan-couple"!' She is really very intelligent."

¹ Sri Ramakrishna was famously known as the '*Paramahansa*'. Literally it means 'The Great Swan'. It is an honorific applied to a monk of the highest order in the Vedanta tradition. His renunciation was legendary. In such a situation, if he were to be seen publicly with his wife, common people would certainly have made fun of the couple. Since he was the 'Great Swan', they

When we listen to this assessment of Sri Ramakrishna, we begin to realize why Sri Sharada Devi, although she wished to attend the Panihati Fair in the beginning, later on, passed the offer. One of the lady-devotees, who was in that room during dinner time, conveyed these words of praise to Sri Sharada Devi. Then she herself said, “When he gave his permission in the morning, I understood that he did not give his wholehearted approval to my going there. If he really approved of my going there, he would have said something like ‘O sure! She should come with us!’ But when he said, ‘If *she* wishes, she may come’, he put the responsibility of the decision on me. I then decided that it would be better not to go there.”

Before we analyze this incident, let us see one more similar incident.

Sri Ramakrishna had a Marwari devotee called Lakshmi Narayan. He was a big businessman. He had the capacity to spend money like water. He revered Sri Ramakrishna. Once he proposed that he would keep Rs. 10,000 (in those days!) in the Bank in Sri Ramakrishna’s name, for defraying his expenses. But, would Sri Ramakrishna agree to this proposition? He was renunciation personified! Listening to Lakshmi Narayan’s words was like getting his own head sawed by a hack-saw; that was how Sri Ramakrishna described his feelings later on. But that Marwari devotee didn’t leave it at that. He tried many means of getting Sri Ramakrishna to accept his proposition. Sri Ramakrishna said in exasperation, “My good man, never ever raise this issue again, ever!” Saying this, he tried to send the Marwari away. But Lakshmi Narayan was determined. He would make Sri Ramakrishna accept his money offering. He now proposed that he would deposit that amount in Sri Sharada Devi’s name. But, if something belongs to his wife, it essentially belongs to him; hence Sri Ramakrishna shot down this proposition too. The businessman then made another plan. He said, “Let me approach Sri Sharada Devi myself and see if she agrees.”

Sri Ramakrishna immediately thought – she is my wife; living with me for this long must have rubbed off my qualities on her personality too; this would indeed be a very good opportunity to test her renunciation. So, when Sri Sharada Devi came to his room, he said, “Look here, Lakshmi Narayan wants to give me Rs. 10,000. Since I said I do not touch money, he now wants to deposit that amount in your name. If you wish, you may take that amount. What do you say?”

Immediately, Sri Sharada Devi said, without the least hesitation, “How could that be? If you rejected the amount, how could I accept it? Moreover, even if I accept it, that amount will be spent on your expenses only. It would have been essentially accepted by you! All these people love you, respect you and revere you mainly for your complete renunciation. So, there is no question of my accepting the amount.”

Sri Ramakrishna was afraid that she would have accepted the money. When he heard her reply, he was greatly pleased. It was as though a great burden was lifted from off his shoulders.

When we analyze these two incidents, we come face-to-face with Sri Sharada Devi’s extremely subtle commonsense. It is very easy to imagine how she would have reacted in both these situations if she had been like other ordinary women.

wouldn’t have hesitated to call them the ‘Swan-Couple’! It was due to Sri Sharada Devi’s foresight that such an embarrassing situation did not arise. Hence he was praising her intellect.

‘If she wishes, she may come’; when Sri Ramakrishna said this, any other ordinary woman would have immediately jumped at the opportunity. For, didn’t he say, ‘she may come’! Who would have normally overcome the desire² to go to the Fair? So, any other ordinary, normal woman would have focused on her husband’s affirmative answer and would have gone to the Fair. But Sri Sharada Devi was extremely sharp, sensitive, and capable of highly nuanced thinking. She focused on ‘*If she wishes*’. Now, when her husband added this clause, it clearly meant that *he did not wish*. Using this train of logic, she decided against her going to the Fair. If she were like any other woman, she could have very logically put forth her justification as follows: ‘Well, what is wrong? What is wrong in my accompanying my husband? Husband and wife going to the Fair isn’t something uncommon; in fact, that is the common tradition. Moreover, so many women are already accompanying him. One more woman would hardly make a difference. Furthermore, doesn’t Sri Ramakrishna himself keep saying, “Go out for a walk, now and then; your mind will be fresh.”? If I go to the Fair, it will be an outing, I will also be able to see the Lord in the Temple there, and enjoy the festivities.’

Similarly, in the Marwari’s incident too, she could have argued like this: ‘Sri Ramakrishna himself is saying, “I don’t need this money. If you wish, *you may accept it*.” What is wrong in my accepting this money? This Marwari devotee is giving that amount on his own. There is great devotion behind his gift. Why shouldn’t I accept it? Sri Ramakrishna is a renunciate, totally dispassionate. It is natural for him to reject that gift. But, no matter how great a renunciate he be, doesn’t he need two morsels of food during lunch-time? And I am bound to prepare those two morsels and feed him. Just look at the innumerable devotees thronging this place! Should I not arrange food for all of them? As the number of people increases, many more amenities will be needed. Only the one who manages these affairs knows the associated troubles in arranging these logistics. Therefore, what is wrong in accepting money that has come on its own? Moreover, Lakshmi Narayan wants to earn spiritual merit by making this gift. He will prosper if we accept his gift. Even from this point of view, it is but right that I should accept that money.’

Many such arguments can be put forth. And most of those arguments will appear to be logically sound, and ethically right. People around us in society will all accept most of these arguments. But, if we see very closely, both the incidents – the Panihati Fair incident and the Marwari’s donation incident – cannot be easily justified by logical arguments. Decisions like this do not emanate from the intellect that we all generally possess. These decisions can only arise from an intellect that has been purified by the light of the Spirit. In Sanskrit, we have a specific word for such an intellect. It is called ‘*Viveka*’. Since Sri Sharada Devi possessed this *Viveka* in abundance, it was impossible that she would have decided in the various ways we enumerated above.

We can clearly identify the difference between intellect and *Viveka* in these incidents. As intellect grows, as intellect develops and becomes sharp, it is not necessary that *Viveka* grows in an individual. We just need to observe the innumerable instances in the world around us, where even very intelligent people make wrong decisions and suffer the unhappy consequences thereof. When we do that, we realize how important it is to awaken *Viveka* in the people urgently. An intellect that has matured into *Viveka* alone can lead us towards our spiritual destiny. If intellect is allowed to develop in its own way, not allowing it

² We must remember that during those days, modes of communication were medieval. People seldom travelled anywhere, except under the most pressing of necessities. Women, especially, had no chance of travel. It is with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, and the consequent technological improvements of train and cars that people have started to travel far and wide.

to mature into *Viveka*, it will be an obstacle in the complete manifestation of our soul's potentialities. Not only that, such an intellect will also nip the 'still small voice' which is inherent within all of us. The Upanishads have a wonderful way of describing this intellect: 'Intellect hides the Supreme Lord sitting within our inner-most Self.' *Brahmanah koshsi medhaya apihitaha*. Therefore, we must struggle hard to obtain this invaluable treasure called *Viveka*. How do we do that? We must keep company of monks and noble people; study the lives and messages of saints and prophets who were imbued with *Viveka*. That is the only way.

Sri Sharada Devi has demonstrated the highest *Viveka* at every step in her life. Each and every word of hers, each and every action of hers, is replete with the highest *Viveka*. Her life is an eternal lesson in *Viveka*! If we keep studying her pure life, and meditating on her words, *Viveka* will naturally awaken in us too. There can be no doubt about that.

What exactly is *Viveka*? Is it common sense? Is it the sense of right and wrong? Scholars translate this Sanskrit word as 'discrimination'. Christians translate it as 'discernment'. All these English words do not convey the entire meaning included in the Sanskrit word '*Viveka*'. The English word 'discrimination' must be used with caution. We must remember that this word is a loaded word today, which is primarily used to refer to situations of gender, caste, racial, and religious inequality, more than in any other sense. Yet, most spiritual literature continues to use this word to mean *Viveka*, in which sense, it actually refers to the ability to discriminate between what is right and what is wrong. But, in daily life, situations are never cut-and-dried, never black or white. Many situations in our daily life simply can't be classified as right or wrong. Seldom can we decide if a particular action of ours is ethical or not. It is especially in such dilemmas that Holy Mother Sri Sharada Devi's life offers us light. But we must put in an effort – we must diligently and repeatedly study her life and message!

It is very interesting to see how Sri Sharada Devi once resolved a dilemma related to the service activities of Ramakrishna Mission. The Koalpara Ramakrishna Ashrama was running a charitable dispensary. Now, a charitable dispensary, by definition, means it will cater to the poor and indigent. But, along with the poor, some well-to-do people also came to that dispensary and availed of the free medicines. The Head of that Center approached Sri Sharada Devi, informed her about these developments and asked her, "Shouldn't we stop these things?" What do you think she replied? 'Well, of course! A charitable dispensary is indeed meant for the poor and needy only. What is the meaning of affluent people taking benefit from such a dispensary? This practice should stop immediately. Prepare a list of all the poor and indigent people of this area; give each of them a piece of paper; only those who can show that piece of paper will be given treatment and medicines here.' Did she pass such a directive? Nothing of the kind! The way Sri Sharada Devi looked at this problem is unique. The sphere of the intellect is quite narrow and governed by dry logic. She, however, lived in the empyrean heights of *Viveka*, a sphere which is expansive and deep.

To the monk who asked her if he should prevent rich people from availing benefits of the charitable dispensary, she replied from that lofty plane, "Look here; you must consider anyone who comes begging to you. Don't let them return empty-handed."

What an amazing answer! Our common understanding is that one who has lots of money, land, jewelry, and such assets is a rich man. But Sri Sharada Devi is teaching us, 'he who wants is a poor man, he who wants not is rich.' Just look at the *Viveka* of this statement. Even from a purely transactional,

administrative standpoint, this is an amazing decision she gave. A person comes to the dispensary for medicines. If we start investigating if he is rich or poor, imagine the logistic nightmare it will create; moreover, where will be the sacredness of the service activity? The monks of Ramakrishna Mission undertake service activities for one's own spiritual development. Any service activity that does not lead to one's own spiritual development is suicidal! Moreover, it is very difficult, almost impossible to determine if one is rich or poor, merely from a superficial inspection of that person. It is possible that a person dressed in ordinary clothes may have lots of money and may in fact be very rich. Conversely, one who is sharp-dressed may in fact be in dire economic conditions. Who indeed can tell? There is one more possible scenario: when an affluent person comes to a charitable dispensary, he may be impressed by the dedication of the workers and may make a hefty donation to the cause! Thus, whichever way you look at it, this decision of Sri Sharada Devi was totally amazing, worthy of emulation.

Even the ordinary actions of Holy Mother had the unmistakable stamp of *Viveka* on them. There are innumerable instances where her amazing interactions with people reveal her *Viveka*. As an example, we shall refer to one incident.

While she was in Jayrambati, she had a Brahmachari who attended on her. His name was Jnan Maharaj. He was trying various means to obtain thick, unadulterated milk for her household. He felt that milk that was meant for her household should be pure, unmixed with water. One day he told the milkman, "My good man, even if you give only eight quarts of milk for one rupee, I don't care. I need the milk to be totally pure. Do you understand me?"

The devotion that Jnan Maharaj had for Holy Mother was unparalleled. Moreover, since there were many small children in her household, there was indeed an urgent necessity for thick milk. But, with all that, Sri Sharada Devi simply did not approve of what Jnan Maharaj did. She immediately called him aside and told him, "What are you doing? Here we get one pint for three pice (i.e. one seer for one pice, sixteen quarts for one rupee). So, even poor people are able to buy and drink milk. But you are inflating the price of milk without giving any thought for others' plight! That fellow is after all a milkman. Milkmen will always add water to milk. Now, if you start paying more, this fellow will only add more water, that is all!" Observe how Sri Sharada Devi demonstrates her acute practical sense in this case. Furthermore, note also how she is concerned that raising the price of milk could adversely affect the poor people in her village.

Once a devotee came to Kamarpukur and wished to obtain a footprint³ of Holy Mother. Sri Sharada Devi was worshipped by thousands in her own lifetime. She had blessed Mantra Diksha to hundreds of devotees; she was their Diksha Guru. Hence it was no surprise that a devotee asked for her footprint. And it wouldn't have been objectionable, in the least, if she had indeed given her footprint to the devotee. But, the supremely intelligent and sensitive Holy Mother could never give a decision based on what is superficial! She did not agree. However, she did not hurt the sentiments of that devotee by directly saying 'No' to him. How did she manage both these requirements? Just look at her reply:

³ Footprint is an article of worship. A strong red color, made from *Agar*, is applied to the sole of the saint. Then a white cloth is pressed to the sole. The resulting footprint is kept as a holy souvenir, or worshipped in a personal shrine as a holy relic. It is generally done for one's Guru.

“This is not the right place for obtaining my footprint. Everyone here does not have your point of view. For instance, the Lahas; many from their family keep visiting this house; if my foot is red with the color of *Agar*, I will have to hide myself when they come here.”

We see here that even when the Lord incarnates as a human being, how careful the Lord needs to be in human interactions. In the Hindu tradition, only a married woman, whose husband is alive, is allowed to apply the red *Agar* paste to her feet.⁴ Even though for the purpose of getting a footprint, if she applied the red paste to her feet, and if her village folks saw that her feet were red, it would have certainly made good food for the grist! She wouldn't give anyone the least opportunity for any such gossip. This foresight was her *Viveka*! No saint is revered in one's place of birth. Sri Sharada Devi knew this very well. Born and brought up in a village, although she was worshipped as the Divine Mother, the Mother of the Universe, as the Supreme Goddess, in the rural eyes of her village folks, she was just any other rustic village woman, just like one of them. She herself was fully aware of her divine nature; hundreds of pure-hearted devotees had recognized the divinity shining forth through her personality; yet, she took utmost care not to disturb the view of those who did not see anything more in her than a rustic village woman. Even when she is unfolding her divine sport as Sharada Devi, how much of *Viveka* she incorporates! This is truly amazing to observe. She was the Divine Mother herself; she was the Primal Energy of all existence; if she exhibited her power, all the worlds were bound to accept it and bow their heads to that supreme power. Notwithstanding all that, for the sake of teaching us, her children, just see how carefully she treads, just like an ordinary human being, at every step in her life!

One more similar incident; she used to live in Udbodhan at that time. A lady-devotee brought a red-bordered saree and offered it to her, praying, “You must kindly wear this saree.” In that lady's eyes, Sri Sharada Devi was not a widow; she was the Divine Mother herself. There was no need for Sri Sharada Devi to bow down to social traditions, since she was the Mistress of the whole Universe. Hence she should wear that saree. Holy Mother did wear that saree. But only for a little while. Then she removed it and kept the saree aside and told that devotee, “come now, be reasonable; I can't wear this saree always. People will make fun of me saying, ‘The Paramahansa's wife now struts around in red-bordered sarees.’ So, let this saree be with me. I will wear it only when I go to the river for bathing.”

‘What matters it if we behave in conformity with social norms? What matters is – do we behave in conformity with our own higher mind?’ This is something every religion says. True. But, in most situations, we must conform to the norms of the society we live in. we find such subtleties in Sri Sharada Devi's life. In innumerable such instances, we clearly see *Viveka* bursting forth through her words and actions.

She was not like those *yoginis* and *tapasvinis* of the Vedic and Upanishadic era who lived in the caves and forests, away from society. She lived all her life in a family setting, deeply entangled in all the complications of a household which was hers and yet was not hers. There was in fact a very deep reason for her living amidst her quarrelsome relatives, as she did. And what was that reason? A person can indeed be at supreme peace, even while living in this world, within a typical household, as a full-fledged member of a family, with all the consequent trappings of trouble-makers and querulous relatives around!

⁴ In the orthodox Hindu traditions, strict rules of conduct are laid down for women. Rules of conduct are different for the maiden and the married woman. Again, different rules existed for the married woman and the widow. We must remember that Sri Ramakrishna had passed away and Sri Sharada Devi conformed to the rules of conduct applicable to her station in life.

She wanted to give this message, loud and clear, to us. If one studies her life in depth, and imbues her thoughts, words and deeds full of *Viveka* in one's own life, even the most ordinary ones amongst us can lead an exalted life, leading to life-fulfilment!

It is most note-worthy to observe how careful she was even while dealing and interacting with her nearest relatives.

She had four brothers. Her youngest brother Abhayacharan had passed away due to Cholera. On his death-bed he had beseeched his sister Sri Sharada Devi to take care of his wife and kids. She kept her word. She took great care of his wife Surabala, and her daughter Radha.

Her other three brothers, although they all had their own sources of income, sponged off liberally on their sister, depending on her for everything. None of them were young. All of them were adults. But they never matured into handling their own lives with responsibility. All three of them were utterly selfish, utterly greedy, and utterly suspicious and jealous of one another. The eldest of them, Prasanna, had two daughters, Nalini and Maku. When his wife passed away, he re-married. So, as generally happens in such situations, both Nalini and Maku started living with their aunt, Sri Sharada Devi. In this manner, Sri Sharada Devi had to bear the burden of a family that was hers, but not really hers.

Prasanna's daughter Nalini suffered from cleanliness-mania. Her OCD behavior got on everyone's nerves in the house and they were all fed up with her. Moreover, all the blind-beliefs and superstitions, associated with medieval, Indian rural mindset, had deep roots in her mind and were firmly lodged in her personality! Add to this the intense hatred that Nalini and Surabala had for each other! There was constant bickering, with high-volume quarrels and swear-words flying all around all the time, with both of them ready for blows! But they all belonged to one family. It was Sri Sharada Devi's responsibility to keep such a family together. She had given a place of respect, prestige and status to even these kinds of irresponsible, immature, juvenile characters in her family. She once explained her method to a close devotee as follows:

“Look here, whatever work you do, you should consider the views of everyone in the household. Each member must have a place in the household. Each member of the household must be given some freedom to live and operate. But you must also keep a close watch on them so that they don't commit blunders. Let me explain to you with an example. Look at this tray here. This contains all these various items that I wish to send to Radha's husband's house as gift for the New Year⁵. But I will be taking Nalini's opinion on this matter. You know the relationship between Nalini and Surabala; a cat & mouse relationship! Nalini can't stand Surabala, and similarly, there is none worse than Nalini in Surabala's eyes. One can't tolerate even the shadow of the other. I will show this list of items to Nalini and ask her, ‘What do you say, Nalini? Which of these items should we send to Radha's husband's house? Tell me your choice.’ She will then look closely at the list of items I have prepared and will probably tell me, ‘What is this, Aunt? Why so few? This is not enough. True, that Radha and her mother don't behave properly with you. They are crazy. But you have a certain status of your own to maintain. Why should you be miserly? Why should people look down upon you? You ought to send gifts commensurate with your prestige and status.’ In this way, she herself will enlarge the list of items I give her! I laugh heartily

⁵ In most Hindu families, there is a tradition of sending gifts to the daughter-in-law's paternal house during New Year. This is a custom that developed in society to ensure healthy family relations.

inside. But, if I send these items to Radha's husband's house without taking Nalini's opinion, and if Nalini should learn that I have sent those gifts, both of them will certainly start fighting. So, there are many benefits of maintaining a low profile of oneself and extending others a little bit of freedom to exercise and operate. When I interact with all these proud people around me, I watch their mental workings very closely. I tread very carefully in their midst. But, with all that, does their nature change? Despite all this caution from my end, every once in a while, their nature comes up, and they work up a good fight. What indeed can I do? I then think within myself, 'All this Sri Ramakrishna's world; he himself will take care of all these meaningless things; I have nothing to do with all this.'

For those of us who live in a family, or in an organization, these words of Holy Mother, replete with Viveka, are invaluable advice. Every sentence in this amazing passage is worthy of our meditation. People of diverse mentalities and attitudes live together under one roof in families and organizations. If they have to live together in peace and harmony, if they have to live a quarrel-free life, these words of life-experience are most useful. We must think on these words and meditate on them. Sri Sharada Devi, who had touched the top-most peak of spiritual experience, lived like an extremely ordinary rural woman, with all the concomitants of a household life. If we ask why she did this, the answer lies in the passage we just quoted above. It was precisely because she lived in such a mundane situation that she was able to give us such life-giving, life-changing, life-exalting advice, replete with the highest Viveka.

Sri Sharada Devi's second brother, Kalikumar, had a very bad temper and was often very rude. His very face, like his nature, was brusque. He was extremely domineering and was a control-freak. He would therefore jump at the least opportunity to take the lead in the household. Sri Sharada Devi knew his nature very well. So she knew exactly how to handle him, based on the time and circumstance. We quote the following few incidents as proof of the same.

Radha gave birth to a boy-baby. The day for *Annaprashana*⁶ for the child was fixed. Sri Sharada Devi was getting things arranged for the ceremony. Many people have to be invited and fed sumptuously. Purchases have to be made for all that. Kalikumar was, of course, ready for taking up that responsibility. But, he had no control on the expenditure. He would spend money like water, even wastefully. Sister's money was like public funds for him, no accountability at all! He would pay reckless amounts for trivial things and make a mess of the whole affair. So, Sri Sharada Devi called Brahmachari Varada Maharaj aside and told him, "Look, I don't have much money with me this time. If I ask Kalikumar to do the purchases, the expenses will sky-rocket. So, all the costly items, I want you to purchase after performing due diligence. Then, some minor items I will get Kalikumar to purchase. Otherwise, he will throw a tantrum saying, 'Sister ignored me during such an important celebration at home!'"

Just see! How practical was Sri Sharada Devi!

It was possible for Sri Sharada Devi to manage her second brother in this manner during the *Annaprashana* ceremony of Radha's child. But a few days later was Sri Sharada Devi's birthday. She couldn't manage him in the same manner at that time. Some days before the birthday, Kalikumar himself approached his sister and started to tell, "Sister, looking at the ever-increasing number of people in this

⁶ As per Hindu traditions and customs, a human being has to undergo certain rituals at specific stages of one's life. These are basically rites of passage. Right from the time of conception in the mother's womb, till death, every important stage in life is associated with a specific ritual. When the child is weaned from the mother's breast, and starts eating cooked food, the associated ritual is called '*Annaprashana*'.

household, I don't think this present cook (who was a lady) will be able to handle the kitchen. I think we should appoint a male cook. Moreover, your birthday is approaching. Many devotees will assemble here. We may have to increase the quantity of purchases needed for the kitchen. Varada is but a child. He won't be able to handle such a big affair."

Kalikumar was hinting obliquely that he was the right person to bear the responsibility of purchasing things for the upcoming celebrations. He had missed the opportunity during Radha's son's *Annaprashana*. Brahmachari Varada had made all the important purchases! So, he has started taking precautionary measures this time! He won't allow the opportunity to pass by. Sri Sharada Devi easily read his mind and gave him the greater portion of responsibility in arranging things for her birthday celebrations. But she did not agree to his proposal of hiring a male cook and told him, "Look here, Kali, my household is full of young girls and women. How can I keep a male cook here? You may object, 'Why, aren't Varada and other male members also here?' But you must consider these young boys as the same as my young girls. You further said that the number of devotees is increasing. Well, that part is indeed true. So, things will have to be purchased accordingly from the market. But, be careful about the price. Make some inquiries in some shops and strike a good bargain."

Having said this to Kalikumar, she called Brahmachari Varada aside and instructed him, "You see, Varada, this time, I am giving the job of making purchases to Kali. He has been planning for this for many days now. If I don't give him some leeway, some freedom, he gets angry and creates a ruckus."

In this incident, we get a most clear direction about how to deal with family-members with a bad temper. Tighten a bit, loosen a bit!

Sri Sharada Devi has been eulogized as 'Embodiment of Purity'. In her own lifetime, innumerable people worshipped her as the Divine Mother of the Universe. We are not speaking of ordinary devotees here; she was literally worshipped by spiritual giants such as Swami Vivekananda, Brahmananda, and the like. More importantly, she was worshipped as '*Adyashakti*' by the greatest Avatara Sri Ramakrishna himself. In spite of all these, just observe how she lived out her divine sport with the greatest caution, binding herself with chains of Viveka in every movement. Studying this phenomenon itself could be a powerful spiritual Sadhana for all of us. Let us look at an instance in this regard:

Sri Sharada Devi returned to Kolkata after her tour of South India. She inquired about a monk of the Belur Math, "Where is he now? What is he doing?" The other monks replied, in a manner of praising that monk, "Mother, he has been eagerly looking forward to meeting you for the last three-four months. He is restless for seeing you. He will have no peace of mind until he meets you in person."

Wouldn't Sri Sharada Devi have been pleased to hear this about that monk? But that was not the case. Instead, with great pathos she said, "What nonsense! A monk has to cut asunder all personal bindings. How else will he progress? A golden chain is no less a chain. A monk must be very careful not to get caught in the illusions of this world. What indeed is this? Simply crying yourself hoarse, 'Mother's love, mother's love'! Always cringing, 'Oh! I still haven't obtained Mother's grace!' What nonsense is all this! I don't like men moving around me. After all, this is a human body I have, you see. Much before you see me as 'Goddess', you must acknowledge that I have a female human form. I have to confine myself to a cloistered company of young girls and lady devotees of high birth. You recall Ashu? Under the pretext

of preparing sandal paste, under some pretext or the other, he would frequent the upper floor. I had to warn him.”

We must delve deep into these words of Holy Mother. If that monk’s soul was indeed really hungry for seeing her, that would have been alright. No matter how great a person be, he is but a child before the Divine Mother of the Universe. So, it was indeed most natural that the monk was eager to meet her. But Sri Sharada Devi is saying, “What nonsense! A monk has to cut asunder all personal bindings. How else will he progress? A golden chain is no less a chain. A monk must be very careful not to get caught in the illusions of this world.” We may feel disappointed with the manner in which Sri Sharada Devi, the Divine Mother herself, responded to the soul’s cry of that monk. To clearly understand her strange response, we must pay attention to one more statement she makes later on. What is that? “After all, this is a human body I have, you see. Much before you see me as ‘Goddess’, you must acknowledge that I have a female human form.” What does this mean?

A man may don the saffron robe and become a monk. But, he still retains a male body. And even when the Divine Mother of the Universe manifests as a human being like one of us, it is, after all, a female human body. Now, when male members keep moving around female members, and female members keep hovering around male members, how does it appear to onlookers? Won’t they make some snide comments from afar? So, be it monks, be it nuns, be it the Divine Mother of the Universe herself; wouldn’t it be that they gave opportunity to people to criticize them? Once criticisms start flying around, will their teaching carry power? Will people value their teachings? So, one ought not to get carried away by one’s emotions. This was what Sri Sharada Devi wanted to convey to that monk. And in conveying this message to that monk, she is educating all of us.

Moreover, there was one more reason why she said something like this. Although she herself had transcended all body-consciousness, she was surrounded by many young girls and women. How would an onlooker feel if men – be they monks, Brahmacharins, or even devoted men – were to be always hanging around her quarters? In general, the presence of a member of the opposite sex tends to create heavy imbalances in people, especially young people. They tend to become very active, very talkative. This actually reveals a lack of mental control. In the case of spiritual aspirants, this is a great weakness, a terrible obstacle. Great caution is necessary to overcome this weakness. That is why she said, “You recall Ashu⁷? Under the pretext of preparing sandal paste, under some pretext or the other, he would frequent the upper floor. I had to warn him.” Through this incident, we get a glimpse of how subtle her spiritual directions were to her disciples.

Holy Mother’s life is replete with innumerable such instances which teach us Viveka. When we study them, we can’t help but be wonderstruck by the manner in which every thought, word and action of hers sprang forth from the subtlest dynamics of Viveka! By leading a life based on the highest Viveka, she strove to awaken Viveka in all of us! Hence her life is a beacon-light, a living inspiration for humanity.

Sri Sharada Devi: Her gracefulness and simplicity

⁷ Ashu is short for Ashutosh, who was a devotee of Holy Mother.

It was 1909. The winter in Kolkata was severe that year. So, some very close devotees requested Holy Mother to wear a woolen blouse. Sri Sharada Devi never wore a blouse, which was typical of traditional Bengali rural women. She would wrap her saree all around her body. The loose end of her saree would be wound nicely under her arms. Generally this was sufficient for those village women. But that year, the cold was really severe. Added to that was the fact that Sri Sharada Devi was getting older now. So, some very close devotees lovingly insisted that, instead of suffering in the cold, she should wear a woolen blouse. Swami Saradananda obtained a '*Guernsey Frock*' from a shop dealing in foreign clothes for her. It was a branded woolen blouse, worth Rs. 10 (which was a huge amount in those days!). Swami Saradananda was one who would go to any length for ensuring the comfort of Holy Mother! There were many, even among the monks, who criticized him when he purchased a house for Holy Mother in Kolkata. He even ran into debt during this endeavor. There was no end to his burdens, what with his having to run the daily affairs of the growing Mission. Yet, he did not flag. He got the 'Udbodhan' built, brought Holy Mother there, ensconced her in her own house, and worshipped her there! That was Swami Saradananda. Sri Sharada Devi herself had showered unstinted praise on him saying, 'Sharat is my *Vasuki*', 'Sharat is my crest-jewel', etc. In many things, she even depended solely on his service. When Swami Saradananda learnt that Holy Mother was suffering from the severe winter's cold, he obtained the best woolen garment for her, like a dutiful and doting son. How do you think Holy Mother responded to this act? She seemed extremely pleased with the woolen blouse sent by her dearest son. But she used it for only three days. On the fourth day, she revealed her innermost thoughts to Saradananda: "My son, does a cloth like this appear proper on a person like me? But, since you gave it to me, I used it for three days, just to please you." Saying this, she folded it and kept it away, never to use it again.

This incident reveals not only Holy Mother's Viveka, but also her culture, sensitivity and gracefulness. 'Wasn't it a gift from her dearest son? Moreover, it was indeed beneficial to use. It was really effective in keeping the cold away.' This could have been a cogent argument for her to keep using it. But it is a really fine line that differentiates the proper from the improper. It won't do to wear anything that doesn't fit with our personality, and with our norms and traditions. Just look at the caution she exercises at every step! A piece of clothing imported from abroad was a sure sign of pelf and luxury in those days; and it was a vulgar display of power in the eyes of beholders of those times. This was the cautionary foresight she possessed. Her close and intimate devotees might not misunderstand her. But how will it appear to others? Hence she decided that it would be wise for her not to wear that woolen blouse. However, look at the grace with which she explains to the person who made her that gift, why exactly she cannot continue using it. We should meditate on the mental culture that enables actions such as these. It appeared as though she really needed that blouse, and hence she did use it heartily for three days. Then she educates Swami Saradananda about the various ramifications of using such a costly, luxurious item. And when she has ensured that he is convinced with her arguments, she removes it and keeps it aside. We must observe and appreciate this tact.

Once more incident; it was Durga Puja. Sri Sharada Devi wished to get new clothes for her nieces. She sent one of the Brahmacharins to purchase them. That particular Brahmacharin was a staunch nationalist, being enamored by the Swadeshi movement. So he purchased only handwoven clothes. They were all coarse, without a decent, defined border, and with dull colors. Obviously none of the girls liked them. They insisted with their aunt that they must be given good clothes; these were not up to their liking. The Brahmacharin felt sad and said, "Oh my God! What you need are foreign clothes. Why should we purchase them?" Sri Sharada Devi was sitting nearby, watching and listening to this strange conversation.

She called the Brahmacharin to her and said smilingly, “My son, aren’t these foreigners also my children? Shouldn’t I look upon all with the same eye? Can I afford to be preferential in my love? Go, and get the clothes these kids want.” The Brahmacharin understood Holy Mother’s feelings. Without another word, he went and carried out her orders. Even though Holy Mother got the Brahmacharin to return the indigenous products and purchase foreign goods instead, doesn’t mean she didn’t care for the Brahmacharin’s feelings. From then onwards, whenever she needed some foreign product purchased, she made it a point to send some other Brahmacharin!

Look at the lesson for us here! That Brahmacharin’s feelings of nationalism were not meant to be a universal ideal. They were his own private feelings; that was all. Yet, look at the grace in Sri Sharada Devi’s actions! She respected that Brahmacharin’s right to entertain his own feelings and never again sent him to purchase any foreign made item! Even if she had sent that very Brahmacharin again to purchase something from a foreign dealer, he would certainly not have felt bad. Yet, she did not force her own ideas on anyone. She did not obstruct his right to entertain his own ideas and feelings. Look at the extremes of grace and sensitivity in Sri Sharada Devi’s interactions that are revealed in this small incident! How endearing it is!

Sensitivity and empathy are not just the hallmarks of a mature personality, but also markers of a spiritual personality, say our scriptures. Upanishads sing praises of the ability to grasp subtle truths. Bhagavad Gita classifies sensitivity as a divine quality: *Mardavam hrirachapalam*. True, if the mind is not subtle, if the heart is not sensitive, it is impossible to rise to the spiritual plane. This is because spiritual truths are all extremely subtle, extremely fine. If we wish to grasp the subtlest of all subtle truths – God – then, we must religiously inculcate sensitivity and empathy in our daily behavior. We must strive to feel, recognize and understand the feelings behind the words and actions of our fellow human beings in the course of our daily life. That awakens real empathy within us. We must temper our own words and actions so as not to hurt the feelings of others. Sensitivity will then awaken naturally in us. But we must remember one important point here: Empathy, sensitivity, grace, goodness – these should not be based on weakness. Any quality arising out of weakness can never be a spiritual quality. The *Mardavam* that Bhagavad Gita refers to is the manifestation of infinite power! Constant service of holy men, constant study of the scriptures, and relentless spiritual Sadhana give rise to a very special quality in us, which is called *Mardavam* or sensitivity. Weakness and divine qualities such as sensitivity have absolutely no connection. In order to truly understand what these divine qualities such as sensitivity, empathy, grace, goodness, etc. are, we must deeply study the lives of spiritual personalities and observe how they manifest these qualities. Sri Sharada Devi’s life is a beacon light in this matter.

Each and every word and action of Sri Sharada Devi was so full of grace that there were absolutely no rough edges in any of them that could even slightly cause pain to anyone at all. Once when she was talking to some devotees, the talk veered round to the Telo-belo incident. It was something that had occurred many years ago. Sri Sharada Devi was then a young girl of 15-16 years of age.

Telo-belo was a vast, terrifying plain stretch of land. Anyone going from Jayrambati to Kolkata had to walk across this god-forsaken plain. It was home to dangerous dacoits. There was a terrifying idol of Goddess Kali standing on those plains. This terrible Goddess was the patron-deity of those dacoits! That idol exists even today, reminding us of those terrible days. These terrible plains stretched for ten

long miles and were so lonely and dangerous that even during the day, no one dared to venture out alone in that region.

Shivaram and Lakshmi once accompanied Sri Sharada Devi from Jayrambati to Dakshineswar. They were Sri Ramakrishna's nephew and niece. They were all actually part of a large contingent. While crossing Telo-belo, Sri Sharada Devi fell behind from the troop, overcome by exhaustion. She could not walk as fast as her companions. So she got separated from the group and had to experience a really dangerous situation. It was past twilight and darkness was fast approaching. Sri Sharada Devi was slowly dragging her feet. A fearsome, dark dacoit accosted her from nowhere! It was a heart-stopping moment! The way Sri Sharada Devi came out of that danger is absolutely amazing! Her biography contains all those incredible details.

The devotees wished to listen to those details directly from Holy Mother. When the Telo-belo incident occurred, was she alone, or was she accompanied by Shivaram and Lakshmi? This question came up. For, how could these two abandon their aunt in that terrifying place all alone? The devotees wanted to clarify this point directly from Holy Mother. Sri Sharada Devi's answer is a lesson in tactfulness. She said, "My Lord! Look at the confusion raised by you all regarding this dacoit's incident! I don't wish to elaborate on this issue. See, Shivu and Lakkhi were indeed with me when we started the journey, but had gone ahead of me around the time we reached those plains. Now, if I start elaborating those details, it will sound very bad, put those two in a bad light, and cause lot of pain to them, if they get to hear of it. That is the reason I don't wish to talk about that incident. Don't keep raking up this point."

What an amazing reply! '*Na bhruyat satyamapriyam.*' Do not utter an unpalatable truth. Isn't this incident the clearest example for this scriptural dictum? How exemplary is Holy Mother's concern that our words should not hurt other people! If the mind is not disciplined, if the heart is not sensitive, can one be so cautious regarding others' dignity? Much greater than the 'gift of food' or 'gift of physical serving' is this 'gift of respecting the dignity of others'!

It is more than sufficient to deeply study the incidents in Sri Sharada Devi's life that exhibit her amazing grace, empathy and sensitivity. Gradually we will find that our own callousness, our grossness, and our heartlessness would have dissolved, and our own personality will gradually get imbued with grace, empathy and sensitivity.

It won't be an exaggeration to say that these qualities – grace, empathy, sensitivity, tactfulness – reached their apotheosis in Holy Mother's life. Sometimes, circumstances demanded her to be stern and even harsh. Even during such circumstances, there was an other-worldly gentleness in her words and actions. We shall look at one such incident, where she had to resort to stern measures to get out of a terrible situation; but underneath her sternness was an uncommon kindness, as we shall see presently. The situation was precipitated by Surabala's father.

Surabala was the wife of Holy Mother's youngest brother. She was mentally deranged. Once when she went to her father's house, she had taken her jewelry box with her. Unfortunately, her own father took that box away from her! Consequently, this development aggravated her madness. She started continuously howling for her jewelry box. Sri Sharada Devi tried various means to pacify her. Suddenly the mad lady changed the tone of her voice and started blaming Holy Mother for her missing jewelry box! Holy Mother was now in a major fix. She sent a devotee to Surabala's father house with the instruction

that either he has to send the jewelry box back or at the least, he himself should come here pronto. Surabala's father did not part with the jewels. Instead, he himself arrived – emptyhanded! “Holy Mother begged him variously, “Return the jewels back to her; spare me from this ignominy; save me from this embarrassment, please!” The old man was adamant and said, “No. they can't be returned back to her.” With no other alternative before her, she wrote a detailed letter to Swami Saradananda. Immediately, Swami Saradananda sent Master Mahashay and Lalitmohan Chatterjee to Jayrambati. Lalitmohan Chatterjee was livid that the old man had created so much trouble and embarrassment to Holy Mother. He decided that the old man has to be taught a good lesson. So, he came to Jayrambati with all preparations for a full show down. He went to Surabala's father's house in a palanquin, dressed like an officer of the British Government in hat, suit & boots, with some policemen accompanying him. No doubt he had obtained the permission of Holy Mother to go there. But Holy Mother's heart was palpitating because she knew that Lalitmohan often got carried away in such situations. He had the tendency to be very rough, very officious and a pain in the wrong place! So, to keep things from getting out of hand, she had sent the soft-natured, calm-minded Master Mahashay to accompany Lalitmohan. Notwithstanding all that precaution, she was apprehensive that Lalitmohan would insult the old Brahmin with his over-enthusiasm! This possibility weighed down heavily on her mind.

Surabala's old father had all but swooned seeing this 'English officer' with all his policemen had official paraphernalia. All his arrogance and stubbornness deserted him. Without a word, he came to Jayrambati, handed over the jewelry box, and returned home. Some felt that it was a good charade; others were pleased that the issue got resolved without any hassles. Everyone had dinner and was sleeping. But, by around 2am, those who were sleeping outside Holy Mother's room realized that she couldn't sleep at all. She was suffering from great physical discomfort. Her head was reeling and she was feeling woozy and out of sorts. All got up and were greatly concerned as to why this had happened to her. Holy Mother herself then explained, “As soon as Lalitmohan left to get the jewelry box back, I went into great anxiety. I was afraid the old Brahmin would be insulted. Since I was tense and anxious the whole day, I have developed acidity and dyspepsia, that's all. It will be alright.”

What an amazing thing this is! A Brahmin, that too, an old man should not be insulted! This feeling of Holy Mother reflects her exalted personality, and reveals her high culture. Of course, he had erred. Although he was a Brahmin, he exhibited greed, it was true. It was alright to make a show of official power, and threaten him with dire legal consequences, in order to get the jewels back. But it was not alright to insult him! Just look at the extreme sensitivity of Holy Mother. She herself called that old man to her house, explained her dilemma, and begged him to help her out of the fix. But the greedy old man did not budge. She could have become angry, used choice words on him, made a big scene and could have made him return the jewels back to his daughter. But, that would have been highly demeaning for the old Brahmin, and more so for Holy Mother. For, social norms dictate that a man getting chastised by women of high culture and noble birth is the same as death sentence. Thus, when negotiations failed, and she was constrained to use force, she was still concerned that the old man should not feel insulted!

This kind of behavior is the hallmark of Sanatana Dharma. Sri Sharada Devi has demonstrated this kind of ideal behavior in every step in her life. When we absorb the sweet fragrance of grace and gentleness wafting from her divine personality, we too can develop these qualities within our personalities. Our personality gets transformed!

Sri Sharada Devi & Gratitude

Gratitude! It is the cornerstone of culture; the surest sign of maturity in a person. The Sanskrit word for this virtue is very interesting. It is '*Kritajna*'. As is generally the case in Sanskrit, the word is formed out of two separate words – '*Krita*' meaning 'that which was done', and '*Jna*' meaning 'knowing or remembering'. So, knowing and remembering all the acts of help and assistance that others have done for me is '*Kritajna*' or gratitude. Gratitude is inherent in man. But when we see it in the personalities of holy men, in men and women of God, the charm of this virtue is incredible!

Sri Sharada Devi has demonstrated this virtue in many different forms in her life.

Whenever anyone gifted her something, no matter how trivial, she valued it greatly. She would praise the giver unstintingly. But, we must realize that she praised the giver not because he or she recognized her (Holy Mother's) greatness. She praised them because she recognized that there was the 'capacity to give' in those persons.

Once, her brother Prasanna's wife, Suvasini, prepared a type of toothpowder. Since she knew that Holy Mother liked that kind of toothpowder, she sent some through her husband to Holy Mother who was then in Kolkata. She was so pleased with that gesture that, after many days, when she returned to Jayrambati, she said to Suvasini, "Look here, that toothpowder you sent me? Everyone there appreciated it a lot." How interesting that Holy Mother expresses her own appreciation of that toothpowder by saying that everyone else in her Kolkata house liked it a lot! Moreover, note that she remembered Suvasini's gift for a long time, and made it a point to thank her for it upon her return.

When gratitude is heartfelt, there will be no barriers of caste or religion, status or prestige. But, what we see generally in the world is something different. Things or services given by those inferior to us in social standing, we don't remember. We instead feel that it was due deference to our superiority. Then there are those proud and arrogant people who perhaps feel that helping them is a favor they do to the ones that render the service or gift! But the great ones behave differently. The way they express their gratitude is genuine, and filled with humility.

Once, a lady devotee of a low caste prayed to Holy Mother, "Mother, I wish to prepare a dish of your liking and feed you myself." Well, the ever gracious Mother gave her consent. One day, she prepared three-four different types of snacks, packed them in small paper bags, and arrived at Mother's house. Seeing those snacks, Sri Sharada Devi was both surprised and extremely pleased. She said, "Just see! How many things she has prepared for us! Poor thing! She must have gone to great trouble for all this!" Those food items were all served during night dinner. Holy Mother ate each one of them, and appreciated the taste. You can imagine the joy of that lady-devotee! The lady's heart yearns to offer the fruits of her own labor to the Divine Mother. And Holy Mother is bursting with the desire to express her appreciation and gratitude, commensurate with the devotee's efforts! It didn't matter at all that the lady belonged to a low caste. Her devoted offering was of no less value to Holy Mother. We must keep in mind that in those medieval days, caste restrictions were very stringent in society. Yet, Holy Mother unstintingly praised her food offering before everyone! Discarding the myopic, retrograde social restrictions, look at the way Holy Mother upheld the human virtue of gratitude in this incident.

Whatever was gifted by her devotees and disciples with love, Holy Mother preserved them with great care. She once said in this connection, “It is not possible to evaluate these gifts of love. The memories of those who gave them to me, is their actual cost!”

Sometimes devotees would do some crochet work or embroidery on mats and shawls and offer them to Holy Mother. Some murals and wall-hangings also were gifted to her. Since she herself knew those skills, she appreciated them greatly. It wasn't a perfunctory ‘thank you’ that those devotees got from Holy Mother for those gifts of love; she would appreciate the skill and effort that went into those gifts and would heartily praise them for the same. Moreover, she would exhibit them and applaud their skill before others, which would multiply the joy of the givers. The unadulterated praise and genuine appreciation that Holy Mother showered on such people is unique. And the way she did that is worthy of our special consideration.

While gratitude is a cardinal virtue on the one hand, and is therefore worthy of being inculcated for its own worth, it has enormous value in practical day-to-day interactions, on the other hand. It has the power to infuse trust between individuals and can be a source of pure and unadulterated joy, greasing the wheels of human interactions. There are those who have no ability to express gratitude, and those who are incapable of recognizing and appreciating the help rendered by others; if you observe closely, you will notice that the words and actions of such people will resemble those of a typical ‘frog-in-the-well’. The life, and personality of such people will be extremely petty and joyless; and more importantly, the cultured and refined people in society will not wish to maintain relations with such petty-minded people. If people don't have the sensitivity of mind and heart to recognize the help that has been rendered to them, who indeed would like to deal with such gross people? In the Vedas, there is a prayer that the Rishis offered to the Lord: *Punardadataghata janata sanghame mahi*. ‘O Lord, may we be able to relate ourselves with the following types of persons: those who can understand the help we render to them, those can help us in return, and those who are not wicked.’

It is good if man can sincerely cultivate this virtue of gratitude in himself. Why? In general, man is psychologically programmed to remember and recall only the harm and hurt that others have done to him! Consequently, if one has to recognize and remember the good that others have done to him, he will need a maturity of heart! It won't be too far from truth to say that differences of opinion and incompatibility between people are important obstacles for the cultivation of gratitude. An amazing harmony is established in society when people can train themselves to be genuinely grateful for the good things that they do to one another.

Gratitude was so natural in Holy Mother that it was visible in her everyday interactions with those around her. But, there was no pretense or insincerity in the gratitude that she so constantly exhibited in her words and actions. Gratitude was the natural fragrance of her highly cultured personality! Let us elaborate this with an instance.

Sri Sharada Devi lived in the Dakshineswar Temple complex in those days. She was totally engrossed in the service of her god-like husband and in her spiritual practices. Whatever milk remained after giving to the Temple Kitchen, the milkman would give to Sri Sharada Devi free-of-cost, for Sri Ramakrishna's use. He would say, “If I give excess milk to the Temple, those priests will give it away to, god knows, what kinds of people. But if I give it here, it will be used by Sri Ramakrishna.” Indeed, he was a blessed milkman! Why do we say so? Even the little bit of gift he made, he was cautious that it shouldn't

go to unworthy people, but should rather reach the right kind of person! Moreover, he had the conviction that, if the milk had to be given for the use of Sri Ramakrishna, it was better to give it as a donation, as a gift, rather than sell it as a commodity! This mentality shows that he was indeed a blessed milkman. Anyway, even though he gave the milk gratis, Sri Sharada Devi never sent him away without giving him some sweets or fruits in return.

These may appear to be trivial things of a humdrum daily life; but we cannot overlook the human virtues – the virtue of gratitude – that Holy Mother is manifesting through these seemingly trivial interactions. We may not find anything spectacular in thanking a sister-in-law for some toothpowder, or in giving sweets or fruits to a milkman in return for a gift of milk. But, we must bow down our heads to the intensity of feeling behind these seemingly trivial actions of Holy Mother.

It was the time when Sri Sharada Devi was in Jayrambati. Devotees had not yet started to flock around her. She had only one assistant at that time. He worked strenuously to serve the Holy Mother whom he saw as equivalent to his Guru. Later on, due to various circumstances, he had to live in different places. Perhaps due to the influence of those around him, his behavior and mentality got totally changed. Some devotees complained about him to Holy Mother, saying, “He has fought with some monks in Hrishikesh. His character is not good.” Then, they asked Holy Mother, “After having served you for so long, how could he become so degenerate?” There might have been a trace of truth in what the devotees had reported. But, she did not get excited by those pinching words of the devotees. Calmly, she said what she had to say and bid farewell to them. After they all left, she explained to Brahmacharin Varada, “My son, I can neither see nor listen to anybody’s faults. Everyone has to experience the fruits of one’s actions, done in this life, or in previous ones. But, by the grace of God, the intensity of those experiences, especially the bad experiences, might reduce. For instance, where a major injury had to happen, one may escape with a pin-prick. See, they are all telling me complaints against this person now. He has indeed served me greatly once upon a time. Where were all these people then? What strain I had to undergo in my brothers’ house during that time! All my sisters-in-law were mere kids then. He was the only one who assisted me then. Ignoring his personal comforts, come rain, come sunshine, he slogged for me. His whole body would get blackened by soot; he wouldn’t care. Now, you see so many devotees here. During those days, who stood by me? Can I forget what he did to me during those days? Look here, if you help a man in a hundred ways, and do but only one act otherwise, man will refuse to see your face. People recognize others’ faults very easily. But, can you recognize the virtues? Recognize qualities in others.”

How exalting these words are! Even when some devotees told her the truth about a disciple’s degeneracy, Holy Mother did not behave like ordinary mortals do – showing repulsion or anger towards him. She fondly remembered the assistance he had rendered so long ago, and she had only her blessings and love and affection for him. How divine!

In the *Vishnu Sahasranama*, the Lord has been called ‘*Kritajna-kritiratmavan*’. Man may or may not remember the service done to him, but God remembers for sure. That is why God is called ‘*Kritajna*’. In fact, it is precisely because God is full of this wonderful quality, that man is able to raise himself to divinity. Is there a limit to the mistakes a man does by his thought, word and deed? But that same stumbling human being, once in a rare while, does something good, either impelled by the merit of his past actions, or due to the influence of a holy man on his personality! God, who is the indwelling Spirit, recognizes those good things, even though they be inadvertent, and gives him the fruits of those good

actions. That is how, in spite of the debilitating downward pull of his tendencies, man is able to rise to spiritual glory. That is why, when man is able to inculcate this virtue in himself, he endears himself to the Lord, and becomes worthy of the Lord's grace.

Holy Mother has revealed many subtle aspects of gratitude through her life. It is common knowledge that we should be grateful to people who have helped us. But gratitude doesn't stop there. Holy Mother teaches us that we should be respectful towards even inanimate things that help us in our life.

Once, a maid who swept the courtyard threw the broom in the corner of the wall, after her job was done. Holy Mother told her, "What is this? You flung the broom after your job was done! It takes exactly the same time to keep it properly in the corner as it takes to throw it there. No matter how trivial a thing is, one should not neglect it. If you show respect towards something, that thing also will respect you in return. Won't you need that broom again? More importantly, that thing is also a part of this household. Even from that stand point, that broom has a pride of place in this house. You ought to look upon even a broom with respect, with a sense of sacredness."

God Incarnate on Earth, Sri Sharada Devi is teaching us how to handle a broom stick! How amazing is her point of view that anything that is useful to us in life should be looked upon with respect and with a sense of holiness associated with it! But, today, not to speak of a broom stick, unfortunately, even the wielder of that broom isn't treated with due respect. Against this general background of value-depreciation in our modern society, these words of Holy Mother are very important.

Then, there is the question of faith and gratitude towards gods and goddesses, and the rituals concerning those deities. Let us look at what Sri Sharada Devi has to say on that topic.

Once, when she was in Kolkata, she got the Chicken-Pox. The priest of the nearby Mother Sitala's Temple was requested to treat her. That priest had some medical knowledge too. Every day he would come to Holy Mother and give her the Prasad and flowers of Mother Sitala. Holy Mother accepted them with complete devotion, as per tradition. Very quickly, she got cured of the Pox. Later on, one day, she called her disciple Swami Shantananda and told him, "Look here, my body is still very weak. I can't undertake a fast now. So, on my behalf, I want you to fast for the whole day, go to the Mother Sitala's Temple and offer Puja to her." The Swami did as he was told. What we need to observe is this: Sri Sharada Devi had not made any resolve to offer Puja to Mother Sitala. And the priest had been given the respect and alms due to him, in full measure. Yet, she is asking that puja be offered to Mother Sitala with due procedure being followed. She had been cured by the grace of Mother Sitala. Now, she wanted to offer more Puja to Mother Sitala by way of showing her gratitude to the goddess. Look at the subtle way Holy Mother is imparting culture to us through this incident. Dialectics and arguments don't work in matters of culture, rituals and tradition. They can't be measured against the calculations which run social life. These are issues related to purity of heart, to sensitivity of our feelings. If anyone develops faith in these things, he will benefit from these rituals and evolve spiritually, for sure!

When holy men show gratitude, it is really out of this world. When we help people, they return that help or show heartfelt gratitude, and that human touch makes us happy. Sometimes, we may even benefit socially or financially from such reciprocity. That is by far the upper limit of gratitude with respect to ordinary people. But, the gratitude that men of God show for the least bit of service we can

render to them, will lift us up to spiritual heights, and make our life fulfilled! The incident of Sri Sharada Devi blessing the devotees of Koalpara comes to mind in this connection.

It was 1911. Jagaddhatri Puja⁸ was being celebrated in Holy Mother's house in Jayrambati. Koalpara was a neighboring village. During the Puja, some devotees from Koalpara gave some baskets of vegetables. Holy Mother was so pleased with that gift that she said, "We don't get fresh greens and vegetables here all round the year. So, quite often, we get into lot of trouble. I feel, now the Lord Himself is getting all that he needs for His Puja through you." Listening to these words, all the physical strain those devotees had in bringing those big baskets of vegetables, simply vanished! The Jagaddhatri Puja was celebrated with great pomp. The Koalpara devotees participated in all the activities connected with the Puja. From then onwards, whenever Sri Sharada Devi would be in Jayrambati, those devotees would send fresh greens and vegetables twice or thrice a week. But they were not affluent enough to hire servants for bringing those vegetables. So one or two among them, after their own day's work ended, would purchase vegetables from the market or directly from the farms, and lift the baskets on their shoulders, and bring them to Jayrambati. Sometimes, they would even go to markets in faraway places to purchase other things required by people in Holy Mother's house. Holy Mother had herself trained those devotees how to properly store the items that they would have brought. In due course, those devotees themselves became the de-facto store-keepers for Holy Mother's household. She was beside herself with joy looking at their devotion and dedication. It was as though those devotees were virtual members of her household! All the inspiration, encouragement and guidance they needed to grow in life, they obtained in full measure from Holy Mother. Whenever they would finish their work in Jayrambati and would leave for Koalpara, they would touch Holy Mother's feet and seek her blessings. She would heartily bless them saying, "May you attain *Jnana*; may you attain pure *Bhakti*."

What those devotees offered was nothing but menial assistance. In return, Holy Mother blessed them with spiritual treasures! Recall Sri Ramakrishna's word: "When the Divine Mother blesses you, she doesn't dispense trash and trinkets; she gives you spiritual treasures!"

Sri Sharada Devi & humility:

Studying Holy Mother's life is one of best windows for studying the progressive manifestation of virtues in a human being. We get to see a blueprint of how this evolution occurs in a person. It is possible to visualize her personality as a veritable monastery, painstakingly built from the austerities involved in manifesting all the divine virtues, one by one. Again, it is also naturally possible to look at her personality as a royal garden filled with all the exotic flowers, comprising divine qualities. Modesty, honesty, simplicity, gratitude, naturalness, generosity, patience, self-control, sympathy & compassion, grace, firmness & rectitude, dignity, courage, purity, and many other divine qualities had manifested in her personality in their fullest. Of all the exotic flowers in the garden of her immaculate personality, humility is a prized flower. Even the most arrogant and haughty person will become humble for some time, at least, if he will study her unparalleled humility.

⁸ In the Easter regions of India, ten days after Diwali, Jagaddhatri Puja is performed. This is actually a form of Durga Puja and has its origins in the 1700s, when a local Raja of Chandan Nagar, Kolkata was imprisoned for a few months by the Nawab of Oudh and had thus missed participating in the Durga Puja. When he was released from prison, the time for Durga Puja had passed. He then instituted the Jagaddhatri Puja as an alternative to the Durga Puja. That is the reason that people who perform the Durga Puja don't perform the Jagaddhatri Puja.

What exactly is humility? What is obedience? The general understanding is that humility and obedience refer to showing deference to our seniors and their directions. But Swami Vivekananda avers that if we have same humility towards those inferior or junior to us, as towards superiors, then that is true humility. When we delve deep into the motives behind human action, we realize the relevance of this new definition of humility that has been given by Swami Vivekananda. Observe the increasing, needless oppression that people in positions of power and authority subject the helpless people to, and you will realize how apt these words of Swami Vivekananda are! These are however academic discussions regarding humility, the semantics of humility. The humility demonstrated in Sri Sharada Devi's life, through her actions, render all these academic discussions on that topic totally insipid! If we have to enjoy that beauty, we have to study the events of her life in detail.

It was the year 1918. By then, many devotees had already become aware of Sri Sharada Devi's greatness. Swami Vivekananda and other monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna had by then openly spoken about her divinity. Holy men like Nag Mahashay, Gopaler Maa and others had introduced Holy Mother as the Divine Mother incarnate to people at large. Thus, during her lifetime itself, Sri Sharada Devi had been worshipped as the Mother of the Universe. Yet, these things did not bring about any change in her demeanor or personality. Her disciples and devotees were wonderstruck observing the naturalness, which was characteristic of Holy Mother, whereby she was able to digest this unimaginable adulation. An incident that occurred during the Jagaddhatri Puja of that year reveals her humility in an unprecedented manner.

Jagaddhatri Puja was a special occasion in Holy Mother's house. The Puja was over with due pomp and as per tradition. A Brahmin by name Haldipukur was the officiating priest. Holy Mother's Family Guru⁹ was the 'Tantradharak'¹⁰. Just as the Puja got over, Sri Sharada Devi offered her respects to her Family Guru by touching his feet. She then proceeded to touch the feet of the Priest. But the Priest refused to accept her respects. He said, "Mother! How can you touch my feet! All we can do is *pray* for *your* blessings!"

The Family Guru 'woke up' as soon as he heard these words of the Priest! It seemed to have dawned upon him then that it would have been better if he had not accepted Holy Mother's respects. But, wouldn't his prestige as 'Family Guru' get affected if he were to repair the faux pas? So, instead of feeling guilty for his transgression, he started quoting a Sanskrit verse that eulogizes the glory of the Guru: *Akhandamandalakaram vyaptam yena characharam; tatpadam darshitam yena, tasmai sri Gurave namaha.*

'No matter how great Sri Sharada Devi is, am I not her Family Guru? So, what is wrong in me accepting her respects?' This was his feeling. But, Sri Sharada Devi never felt that her Family Guru

⁹ In Bengal, there is the tradition of a Family Guru. A particular Brahmin is designated as in-charge of some families. These families will belong to the Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaishya castes only. It is his responsibility to ensure that those families under his charge conform to the traditions and customs of Hinduism. He has to perform all the samskaras for all the members of those families. We must understand that although the word 'Guru' is used in this case, it does not refer to any spiritual responsibility on the part of the Brahmin; his scope is confined to ensuring that the families conform to the Hindu traditions. The Family Guru is a hereditary post in the Hindu society, which means that when the Family Guru dies, his son takes over the duties towards all those families who were in his father's charge.

¹⁰ When a major Puja, like the Durga Puja, or Kali Puja or Jagaddhatri Puja is performed, there is a very practical arrangement that is followed. The Puja is performed by a Brahmin priest called the 'Pujari'. Since the paraphernalia is really huge, and there are a large number of rituals to be performed, with appropriate mantras to be uttered at each step, the Pujari will have a person with him, who will assist, guide and prompt him at every step. This person is called 'Tantradharak'.

would refuse to accept her respects. Moreover, she was truly grateful to him for having borne the responsibility of ‘Tantradharak’, and ensuring the success of the Puja. So, when she touched his feet, there was genuine gratitude in her heart. But, when he chanted that Sanskrit, verse, she understood the situation. Immediately, she said, “That is true, that is indeed true”, and supported the view of her Family Guru. Thus she spared him any further embarrassment.

We must understand this incident properly. ‘I am literally worshipped as Divine Mother incarnate by thousands of devotees; will it look proper if I touch the feet of an ordinary Family Guru?’ This thought never even entered Sri Sharada Devi’s mind! Doesn’t this reveal her humility in the brightest colors? Notice one more very important thing here: by saying, “That is true, that is indeed true”, she is protecting the prestige of her Family Guru and ensuring that he doesn’t feel any further uneasiness! We must recognize that by this action of hers, she has manifested her humility in its complete form.

One day, an old man called Ganesh Ghoshal came from Kamarpukur to see Sri Sharada Devi. He was a childhood friend of Sri Ramakrishna. He and Sri Ramakrishna had actually been classmates. He was therefore about twenty years older than Sri Sharada Devi. When he came, she welcomed him heartily, and bent down to touch his feet, as a mark of her respect. But Ganesh Ghoshal had great devotion to Sri Sharada Devi, and was convinced of her divinity. So, when she proceeded to touch his feet, he objected and said, “Mother! How can that be! If mother touches her son’s feet, it spells doom for the son. Please don’t do that to me.”

Saying this, he himself went down on his knees and touched her feet instead. Why did Holy Mother try to touch this old man’s feet? And why again did the old man himself touch her feet? What is the significance of these two events?

Ghoshal was an elderly person, and her husband’s childhood friend. Isn’t it proper for us to show respect to our elders? This was Sri Sharada Devi’s feeling. Therefore she bent down to touch his feet. This shows her genuine humility. But the old man’s actions are even more meaningful. He could very well have argued like this: ‘Sharada is a woman from a neighboring village; she is much younger than me in age; I have seen her since she was small kid; it is proper that she touches my feet as a mark of her respect towards me.’ If he had argued thus and had accepted her respects, people wouldn’t have objected at all, for that was indeed the local tradition. But he objected. This reveals not only his humility, but more importantly the depth of his devotion towards Holy Mother. He had seen the Divine Mother manifested in her and worshipped that vision in Sri Sharada Devi. So, he offered his respect to her, instead of accepting her respects, as would have been right as per local customs, and returned home with satisfaction in his heart.

When the lotus blooms, bees come from far and wide and enjoy the nectar from within its depths. But the frogs that live near that lotus live blissfully ignorant of the heavenly fragrance; they don’t feel attracted to the flower, and are satisfied with eating the flies of that area. Innumerable devotees came from far and wide, attracted by the divinity of Holy Mother, worshipped her as the Divine Mother in flesh and blood, obtained spiritual treasures from her¹¹, and went back fulfilled. But those who lived near her always knew her only as sister, aunt, sister-in-law, etc. They were all deeply entrenched in their family relations. Hence they all never witnessed the divinity that manifested in her personality with such great

¹¹ Please refer to ‘Sri Sharada Devi – Bestower of spiritual treasures’ for details.

intensity. But Sri Sharada Devi never tried to impress such people with the force of her divine personality. Instead, in all such interactions, she came across as an extremely ordinary lady, without the least trace of any ego regarding her exalted spiritual stature. Such interactions were the blazing examples of her deep humility.

Once, a relative asked her, “So many people, from far-away lands, are thronging here just to have a look at you! But we have been unable to truly recognize you. Why?”

Sri Sharada Devi replied, “It doesn’t matter that you all have been unable to recognize me. You are all my very own. I am your very own. That is enough.”

These were merely words of consolation; that is all it was.

Once, Ambika Bagdi, the village watchman of Jayrambati, asked her, “Mother, people call you Devi, Bhagawati, etc. But we all don’t feel like that at all!”

Sri Sharada Devi replied very naturally, in a low voice, “Look here, you don’t have to look at me like that at all. You are my elder brother Ambika, I am your younger sister Sharada; know this much; that is more than enough.”

This is yet another word of consolation, like the previous case we just saw. We must pay close attention to the way Holy Mother answered in both these cases. We can’t control the urge to display the least bit of greatness that we come to possess. But Holy Mother demonstrated how to live a normal life despite being infinitely great.

Another similar incident: Nalini, who was Sri Sharada Devi’s brother’s daughter, once asked her, “Aunt, people address you as the indwelling Goddess, Bhagawati. Are you truly the indwelling Goddess?” Sri Sharada Devi did not give any reply to this query; she merely smiled at her niece. But Nalini was insistent. Then Holy Mother replied, “People say all such things out of their devotion. What indeed can I be, my dear child? Sri Ramakrishna is everything. All of you should please pray to Sri Ramakrishna that I should never have body-consciousness.”

Observing that Sri Sharada Devi was playing down her real stature, and diverting their attention away from her divine nature, a devotee who was in ear-shot immediately pointed out, “Innumerable people are attesting that Sri Sharada Devi is the Divine Mother incarnate. But God only knows how many of them have how much Shraddha in what they say! When faithless people like us say such high-sounding words, it appears like prattle, that’s all.”

“That’s true”, said Sri Sharada Devi. That devotee then continued, “Unless Sri Sharada Devi herself reveals her real nature through her own grace, it is impossible for anyone else to understand who she really is. There isn’t the least trace of ego in her. That is the reason divinity manifests through her. Ordinary souls are so full of ego. Thousands of people come here, saying ‘You are the Goddess Lakshmi, you are the Divine Mother’, they roll at her feet. If she were an ordinary lady, she would have burst with egotism by now. Is it possible for an ordinary person to digest so much of adulation and worship?”

Smiling sweetly, Sri Sharada Devi looked at that devotee. No words; just silence.

Once Sri Sharada Devi went on a pilgrimage to Puri. Govinda Singari was a Panda¹² there. He was the family Panda of Balaram Basu, a prominent devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. This Panda came to know that Sri Sharada Devi was the wife of Balaram Basu's Guru. He felt that in keeping with the prestige of Balaram Basu's family, Balaram's Guru's wife must be taken inside the Puri Jagannath Temple in a palanquin. He spoke to Holy Mother about this matter. She did not agree; instead she said, "No, Govinda. You lead my path, explaining all the things we pass by; I shall follow behind you like a helpless woman, which in reality, I am."

She went in exactly this manner to the Jagannath Temple and returned.

We need to think a little deeply on this incident. Sri Sharada Devi could have agreed to go by a palanquin arguing that by doing so, she would be giving an opportunity to Govinda Singari and to Balaram Basu's family members to serve her. Even if she had gone by palanquin, nobody would have criticized her for that. But, Sri Sharada Devi did not give any thought to these specious arguments; she decided that if one were to go to the Temple for seeing the Lord, it is best to go there in all humility, in all the simplicity of a devotee. So, she walked to the Temple and back. There is a lesson for us, in every movement of an incarnation of God.

Sri Sharada Devi's point of view was that when performing Puja or carrying out a religious vow, one should be full of humility and surrender to the Lord. Some of the readers may object and say, 'Is it necessary to spell out the obvious? Doesn't everyone know that while performing religious activities, one ought to be humble and do those rituals with a sense of self-surrender to the Lord?' True; nobody shows arrogance in connection with religious activities. But, Sri Sharada Devi explains the necessary inner feeling one should have when undertaking such activities.

During one of the Jagaddhatri Puja occasions, innumerable devotees had assembled at Jayrambati to be blessed by the Holy Mother. Everyone put in their bit of effort, enthusiastically, and preparations for the Puja were made in a grand manner. It was Sri Sharada Devi's unique ability that she would give her attention to every small detail connected with the Puja. Yet, on the day of the Puja, she went to the idol of Jagaddhatri repeatedly and prayed with all humility, "Mother Jagaddhatri, please ensure that your worship is performed without any lapses."

We must give our special attention to what happened here. Sri Sharada Devi is herself the Divine Mother. The worship that is being organized is also of the same Divine Mother. Can there be any chance of any lapses in this unique arrangement? Notwithstanding all this, she prayed repeatedly with folded hands before the idol of the Mother that the puja may proceed without any trouble. She is explaining to all of us that when we perform Puja and similar religious activities, we must do so with great Shraddha and Bhakti, depending solely on the divine power of the Lord. Holy Mother is revealing a great secret here that Mother's work had to be done by Mother's divine power and grace alone!

Two devotees once came to Udbodhan. Before serving them food offered to Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother touched the food items to her mouth, thereby consecrating it. She did this, perhaps by divining the heart-felt desire of those two devotees for having Sri Sharada Devi's Prasad. Their joy was

¹² In a holy place, there are people who guide devotees who come there; they make arrangements for these devotees to stay and have food and to move and see around the place. They also take care of the priestly responsibilities of these devotees. These people are called Pandas. They are present in every major pilgrimage place in India.

boundless! They partook of that consecrated food with great delight. There was one more devotee who was nearby, and was watching all this. Feeling that he should not feel left out, Holy Mother gave him also some food by consecrating it as her Prasad. But that devotee was distraught! He said, “Mother, other than Sri Ramakrishna’s Prasad, I can’t take anybody else’s Prasad.”

Some of us may feel that he shouldn’t have been so blunt. But he wanted to safeguard his one-pointed devotion very jealously! All these things aside, how do you think Holy Mother reacted to this person’s strange objection? Isn’t this a situation which can aggravate the anger of ordinary self-important people? Of course, it is a text-book example of such a situation. But, Sri Sharada Devi responded in the most natural manner and simply said, “Is that so? Then you need not eat it.”

But, wonder of wonders! A few moments later, something stirred within that devotee’s heart. Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sharada Devi are not different; they are identical; this spiritual truth flashed before his mind’s eye! With great feeling he burst out, “Mother! I have understood now. You are one with Sri Ramakrishna.”

Sri Sharada Devi then said with the same naturalness as before, “Is that so? Then you may now eat this Prasad.” That devotee ate that consecrated food with great devotion and returned home.

When we meditate on this supremely strange incident, we realize how natural Sri Sharada Devi’s humility was. She was the Mantra-Diksha Guru for innumerable devotees. She had imparted monastic vows to many spiritual aspirants. Great spiritual giants such as Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda and others literally worshipped her as the Divine Mother incarnate! Such was Sri Sharada Devi; and out of her infinite grace, she gave that devotee food consecrated by her. And what did that hapless man do? He refused to eat her Prasad! Then, after a few moments, when he comes back and demands to have her Prasad, she doesn’t scold him, doesn’t berate him; with her natural and spontaneous love, she feeds him the Prasad! Is this her infinite compassion? Or is it her infinite grace? But one thing is very clear in this incident: and that is – the utter and complete absence of egotism, self-importance in her!

We have seen before how Sri Sharada Devi suffered from Chicken-Pox during one of her Kolkata visits. The Priest of the Sitala Temple in Baghbazar was hired to treat her. He knew a little bit of medicine too and would practice as a doctor in nearby areas. Every day he would come by and give Holy Mother the flower-offerings and Prasad of Mother Sitala. Holy Mother would touch his feet every day and take his blessings. Seeing this, a devotee asked, remonstrating, “Mother, what is this! You touching the feet of this priest?! Please don’t do that. We don’t know what sort of a person he is, what is his character; we know nothing about him.”

Very calmly, Holy Mother explained, “Whatever it be, he is a Brahmin. For that one reason alone, if not for anything else, he must be shown the respect due to him. Sri Ramakrishna did not incarnate to destroy any of the old traditions.”

This incident, again, very clearly shows Holy Mother’s incredible humility. We also get to see her impulse to protect all that is good in the age-old traditions of society. Sri Sharada Devi was worshipped by the incarnation of the new age, Sri Ramakrishna. Such a person is now touching the feet of an ordinary priest! This might look unsettling to us. Some of us may feel this is taking things a bit too far, even. Such misgivings are indeed, par for course. That is because we have never seen such natural humility in

anyone. What is common in this world is either arrogance, or hypocrisy. People judge others only against their own standards. But Holy Mother is showing us how to throw aside all such pettiness and give the respect due to others, without any personal calculations. When everyone is busy in protecting and projecting one's own self-importance, this genuine humility shown by Holy Mother is a powerful medicine to cure the arrogance in all of us!

Many Brahmacharins and Sannyasins of the Ramakrishna Order had the great good fortune of getting Mantra Diksha and Sannyasa Diksha directly from Holy Mother. So, Holy Mother was Guru for all of these monks and novices. Yet, it is amazing to observe the way she showed respect to monks and novices of the Order. By doing so, she was driving others around her to do the same. Actually, all monks, Swami Vivekananda and Brahmananda included, became like three-year old kids in front of her. How was this possible? How could spiritual giants like Swami Vivekananda and Brahmananda become literally like small children before her? It was because Sri Sharada Devi had within her heart an ocean of motherly love! So, even though these giants behaved like children before her, she did not tone down her attitude towards monks and Brahmacharins. On her part, she always showed the necessary deference that ought to be shown to these renunciates. Even though they were her disciples, even though they were all much younger to her in age, she showed the requisite respect to all of them, uniformly. It was precisely for this reason that she had not given Sannyasa Diksha to Brahmachari Varada, who was her assistant. Her point of view was – it would not be right for a monk to serve a ‘married lady’¹³ like her.

An amazing incident occurred when Sri Sharada Devi was in Belur Math. One afternoon, after lunch, Brahmachari Rashbehari poured water for her hands. Holy Mother's habit was to wash both her feet along with her hands after lunch. But rheumatism made it very painful for her to bend down and pour water over her feet. Knowing this, Brahmachari Rashbehari considered it his good fortune to wash her feet with his own hands. Holy Mother said with an alarm in her soft voice, “Oh! No, my son, no. You are all worthy of being worshipped by gods!” Saying this, even in her old age, with her painful rheumatism, she herself poured water over her feet, and wiped it with a cloth. Sri Sharada Devi was the Divine Mother incarnate. Yet, she looked upon these monks and Brahmacharins with so much reverence! This was the utmost respect she showed to the grand ideal of renunciation and monasticism. Notice also her other-worldly humility that is expressed in this incident.

A question may arise in our minds; when all the monks, including the great Swami Vivekananda, were like small kids before her, where arises the question of her showing respect to these monks? She, being the Divine Mother of the Universe, should shower her love and affection on her kids; how can she show respect to her kids? This same question tormented Holy Mother's disciple, Swami Vishweshwarananda once. He asked Holy Mother directly, “Mother, how do you look upon all of us?” Immediately she replied, “As God in flesh and blood.” The Swami asked further, “But aren't we all your children? If you look upon us as God, how can you consider us your kids?” Then Holy Mother clarified, “Look here, I see you all as God; then again, I look upon you all as my own children.”

Now, this is something unique! This vision is unprecedented; humanity has no record of anyone ever having entertained anything close to this vision till now! Just look at the absolute harmony between

¹³ Sri Sharada Devi's renunciation and dispassion were greater than the greatest sannyasin; there can be no doubt about that. Yet, she had married Sri Ramakrishna with fire as her witness, as per ancient Hindu traditions. Hence she considered herself as a ‘married lady’. But her renunciation, dispassion and purity cannot be compared to anybody else in known human history. Readers may kindly refer to ‘Sri Sharada Devi – the embodiment of Purity’ for more details in this regard.

the human and the divine in Sri Sharada Devi's vision! It is indeed one of the wonders of her personality that she was able to maintain a natural humility at every stage in her life.

Remember, however, that there was absolutely no artificiality in her humility. There was no selfish motive behind her humility, nor was there any fear for conformity in her actions. Nor, again was her humility due to an inferiority complex or social awkwardness in her personality. Her humility arose spontaneously from her extremely exalted spiritual consciousness! *Vidya dadati vinayam*; 'real education culminates in humility', says an old Sanskrit saying. As a person gets progressively educated, the awareness dawns in him that there is still so much more that he has to know. Then, instead of bloating in arrogance, he bends with humility. He becomes eager to learn more and yet more. And as he gains more knowledge, simultaneously he becomes more and more aware of his shortcomings, and he becomes more and more humble. We must note that Sri Sharada Devi was not educated in a school or college. How could she develop true humility then, which, as we saw, comes only from true education? True, she had no academic education, but she knew her spiritual nature, by direct perception. Moreover, she was knowledge incarnate! That was the reason her humility was most wonderful, other-worldly, and absolutely incredible! Studying and thinking deeply about the incidents in her life that reveal her humility are a purifying experience! Indeed, humility that arises from spiritual experience is the real humility. In this regard, Sri Sharada Devi once said, "As you go on praying and meditating on the Lord sincerely, you will begin to see clearly that 'The same Spirit that is within me, is within everyone, even in the lowest being'; that is when you can truly be humble."

Even though Sri Sharada Devi is the Infinite Power of the Universe, this time she has incarnated in an extremely simple form. That is the reason she was always cloaked in humility while enacting her divine play on Earth. We shall look at an incident that clarifies this assertion of ours:

This was before Sri Ramakrishna's Mahasamadhi. He was bed-ridden in Cossipore Garden House. Like every day, that day too Sri Sharada Devi took his lunch to his room. Sri Ramakrishna was reclining on his pillow; his eyes were closed. In a very low voice, she called out, "It's time for your lunch; will you kindly wake up?"

Sri Ramakrishna slowly opened his eyes; it seemed like he was returning from some faraway place in the spiritual planes, which were his haunts. He looked intensely into the eyes of his wife, who was standing with the plate of food in her hands, and said, "Look here; these people of Kolkata are living like worms. You should take care of them."

Why would Sri Ramakrishna be saying something like this? He had already worshipped his wife as Goddess Shodashi and had prepared her for participating in his divine mission. Moreover, by repeated saying things like 'She is Goddess Saraswati; she has taken birth to impart knowledge to people;' 'Is she an ordinary woman? She is my Power;' he had openly declared her real stature to those around him. By all these means, he had also told Sri Sharada Devi that she had a very important role to play later on, in her life. Not only that, there were many instances when he delegated the spiritual responsibility of some disciples and devotees to her. In other words, there were instances when he sent some of his disciples and devotees to obtain Mantra Diksha and spiritual guidance from Sri Sharada Devi. In this way, he had tried variously to establish Sri Sharada Devi on the Guru's spiritual pedestal even during his lifetime. But, one who was draped in modesty, one who was humility incarnate, as Sri Sharada Devi was – would she discharge her duties in the role of a spiritual Guru, while her husband was still alive? Hence, during his

last days, Sri Ramakrishna was eager to handover the responsibility of the spiritual welfare of the people of Kolkata to Sri Sharada Devi, and thereby leave his mortal coil in peace. That is the background behind these strange words of Sri Ramakrishna to Sri Sharada Devi: “Look here; these people of Kolkata are living like worms. You should take care of them.”

She replied, “How is that possible? I am, after all, a woman.”

Sri Ramakrishna did not agree. He again said, “How much can I alone do? There is a lot that needs to be done by you. You shall do it.”

Now, Sri Sharada Devi replied with a grave voice, “Those things will happen when they have to happen. Now eat your lunch, please.”

Even while having his lunch, Sri Ramakrishna came back to the same issue from various angles, saying, “Do you know how much suffering I had to undergo, by incarnating as a human being? With whom, indeed, can I share those things? But, I am not to suffer them all alone; you too have a share in those sufferings.”

This is indeed an unbelievable conversation, with great spiritual significance. Even on his deathbed, Sri Ramakrishna was not concerned with his fatal disease, but with the spiritual ignorance of those around him. What compassion! Not only was he concerned with those ignorant souls, but he was goading his own wife to do something for spiritually uplifting them. Just look at the unselfishness!

Sri Sharada Devi started by giving excuses such as ‘I am after all only a woman’, but when push came to shove, she said with sufficient gravity, ‘Those things will happen when they have to happen.’ What does that mean? It means, ‘I shall cross the bridge when I get to that river’; ‘I will do it when the right time comes’. She had incarnated with the sole purpose of assisting Sri Ramakrishna in establishing spirituality in the world. She knew it only too well. There never was a moment in her life when she lost sight of that purpose. Yet, when Sri Ramakrishna asked to take care of the spiritual welfare of those ignorant souls, effectively asking her to assume the role of ‘Spiritual Guru’, her natural humility shines forth, and she says, “How is that possible? I am, after all, a woman.” This reply is so very apt, so very typical of her personality!

She could have instead replied, “Great; what’s there in that? Don’t I know about that pending work? Please rest assured, I have it all covered.” Those words would have been certainly been a direct answer to Sri Ramakrishna’s question. But what about the mind and feelings of the utterer it would have revealed?

Consider another alternate scenario. In order to pacify her husband, she could have, in all humility, answered like this: “Alright; as per your wish, I will take care of the spiritual development of these people.” But, Sri Sharada Devi’s personality was such that there was no possibility of giving breath to even that much of egotism. But, when Sri Ramakrishna was inordinately stubborn, and would not give up until he got her consent in the momentous matter, all she gave was an oblique reply: “Those things will happen when they have to happen.” We must appreciate the utter lack of ego in this reply. There is no sense of ‘I will do it.’ All we see is a supreme attitude of non-attachment: ‘when the right time comes, things will happen appropriately; I don’t have to do anything.’

We must note an important point here. This answer that Sri Sharada Devi gave – it was not to please her husband, nor was it out of her acute sense of modesty. Later on, when she indeed gave Mantra Diksha and Sannyasa Diksha, it was the same sense of non-attachment that was congealed in those actions. Spiritual aspirants thronged to her, by day and by night, attracted by her spiritual aura. Hundreds of devotees made a bee-line for her blessings. But she never once felt that this entire multitude was coming due to ‘her’ greatness. In this regard, she once said, “Sri Ramakrishna himself brings all these people here.” Again she said, “No, no; I am nobody; Sri Ramakrishna himself blesses them all through his infinite grace. I am just an instrument.”

Through these words, we get an unprecedented peek at the humility of the Divine Mother of the Universe. Sri Sharada Devi’s divine play was indeed unparalleled. Never before had the Divine Mother quelled the arrogance in man in this manner. The Puranas depict the gory battles that the Divine Mother fought in order to destroy the demons. The Kena Upanishad tells the story of how Divine Mother incarnated as Uma Haimavati in order to quell the egotism of the gods. But, what did Sri Sharada Devi do in her most recent incarnation? By herself embodying supreme humility, she is awakening humility in mankind. What a novel method, indeed! We must observe the divine fragrance of humility wafting out of every event of her unique life. Her life must be studied, repeatedly, from this point of view. Then, our personality will get formed in the real sense.
