

A MAN OF GOD

By SWAMI VIVIDISHANANDA



SRI RAMAKRISHNA MATH
MYLAPORE MADRAS 4

THE ETERNAL
COMPANION

Spiritual Teachings of Swami
Brahmananda—a direct disciple
of Sri Ramakrishna.

By SWAMI PRABHAVANANDA.

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Gives an inspiring account of the life
and teachings of the first President
of the Ramakrishna Order and the
“spiritual son” of Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna Math
Mylapore, Madras-4.

A MAN OF GOD

(Glimpses into the life and work of
Swami Shivananda, a great disciple of
Sri Ramakrishna)

By

SWAMI VIVIDISHANANDA



SRI RAMAKRISHNA MATH

MYLAPORE

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MADRAS-4

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Dedicated

to

the Lotus Feet of Sri Maharaj
SWAMI BRAHMANANDA
Sri Ramakrishna's Spiritual Son
Who Exemplified the Ideals
the Master Embodied and Taught, and to,
All Seekers of God Everywhere

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

We have much pleasure in bringing out the life of Swami Shivananda, a direct, monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. The Swami who was the Second President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, is popularly known as Mahapurush Maharaj, a cognomen given him by the great Swami Vivekananda, in appreciation of his pure and spotless life.

Swami Vividishananda, a senior monk of the Order and head of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Center, Seattle, Washington, U.S.A., has written this life. The author had the good fortune to know and associate with Mahapurushji for a number of years and has therefore been able to give his personal impressions and reminiscences in addition to the materials collected from various authentic sources, in this book.

As the head of a world-wide religious organization for over a decade, Swami Shivananda unstintedly ministered to the spiritual needs of many seekers of truth, guiding and moulding their lives, and bringing peace and solace to them. In this book the reader will find a reliable and graphic account of the Swami's unique life, dedicated to the worship of God and the service of man as the living image of God.

15th June, 1957.

PUBLISHER

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PREFACE

Immeasurably great was Sri Ramakrishna, and so too were his disciples. The Divine Power that became embodied and worked as the Master was also channeled through his disciples, making them Its blessed instruments. Sri Ramakrishna may be likened to a gigantic banyan tree, covering a wide area — a miniature forest, giving shelter and shade to countless weary souls. His disciples symbolize the many offshoots, branches and limbs of that mighty tree, each one unique, expressing a particular phase of the Master's multiple personality. With the passing of days and added knowledge and experience, we realize more and more the importance of each and all of these great souls in the cosmic scheme. We feel assured that what we think of them at this date will be small in comparison with the future estimate of them by our remote posterity. One has to look at a Divine Incarnation and his apostles through the perspective of time. We must judge a man by the shadow that he casts; there can be no doubt that the shadows cast by the Master and his spiritual successors will be immensely enlarged, assuming majestic proportions in the distant future, centuries hence.

This biography of Swami Shivananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, is our honest attempt to portray the life and work of this "Great Soul" — our humble and worshipful tribute to his sacred memory. For a number of years we had the blessed privilege of enjoying the Swami's holy association, even as we received his fostering love and care. Our sketch is therefore the combined fruit of personal impressions and patient study and research. While preparing the book we have been aware, as was natural, of our

personal limitations and have approached our task, a difficult one, with all the reverence and care it deserves. We have this satisfaction that we have done our humble best. How far we have succeeded in this it is for the readers to judge.

While delineating the Swami's life and personality, we have tried to capture him in his many spiritual moods, keeping in view the typical man of God that he always was. To be on the safe side, we have often let the Swami recount his own story in his direct, simple way. It has been stated in the text that the Swami was rather reticent about himself, especially during the earlier years of his career; but later when he had become the head of the Order, he seemed to have cast off this reserve, becoming more communicative, telling others about his personal life — his austerities and realizations, as well as about his Master and brother disciples. These reminiscences and observations, interspersed here and there, represent an invaluable factor of our presentation, and one which should certainly be appreciated by students of mysticism. Purposely we have added quite a few conversations and letters, which, in dealing with spiritual problems of many kinds, form likewise an interesting feature of our account. As the book is intended to be more than a biographical sketch of an illumined saint, it has sought to explain the Swami's significant role as the head of a growing monastic order — an order representing Sri Ramakrishna and his world-wide divine mission, with its ever increasing activities of ministration.

For many of the data and materials used in our biography we are specially indebted to the following books written in Bengali, the language that the Swami spoke, and published by the Udbodhan Office, Baghbazar, Calcutta: "Mahapurush Shivananda" — a life written by Swami Apurvananda, a personal attendant of his for a number of

years; "Shivananda Vani", Vols. I and II, — collections of his conversations, compiled by the same author; "Mahapurushjir Katha", a compendium of his utterances; "Mahapurushjir Patra", a collection of his letters. We have also consulted the book: "The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna", published by the Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Himalayas. Our indebtedness is very great to the excellent articles dealing with the Swami's life and work which appeared in "The Voice of India", a bimonthly periodical, conducted some time ago by the Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco, U.S.A. We must also acknowledge with thanks the many words of encouragement and appreciation as well as helpful suggestions received from some of our brother Swamis who had known Mahapurush well and who have been so gracious as to inspect the manuscript. The unpublished letters used in the book have been kindly lent by certain monks and also a devotee of our Order.

For the editing of the manuscript we are very grateful to our good friend Dr. Douglas B. Soule, who teaches languages in the City College of San Francisco, California, an institution of junior college rank. In spite of his heavy schedule of work at the college he has been kind enough to undertake this work and has done a splendid job within the limited time allowed. May the Lord bless him for his service! Our sincerest and warmest thanks and appreciation are due to Mr. Christopher Isherwood for kindly writing the Foreword to the book — an illuminating article. Coming as it does from the pen of a well-known thinker and writer, the Foreword has indeed added to the value of the biography. We shall be failing in our duty if we do not express our sense of gratitude to the devotees in Seattle and San Francisco who have greatly helped in preparing the book and in getting it ready for the press by

typing the manuscript. But for their patient labour of love the book would never have appeared in print. May the Lord reward them for their services!

As we conclude our Preface, we hope and pray that "A Man of God" may reach a truly wide public, thus serving the purpose for which it has been written. If it helps many seekers of God in their long journeys, bringing them cheer and comfort as well as the light of spiritual understanding embodied and expressed so abundantly by Mahapurush, the credit is his and not ours. It is his words—his inspiration — his dedicated life!

Ramakrishna Vedanta Center, }
 Seattle, Washington, }
 June, 1957. }

VIVIDISHANANDA.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The second edition of "A Man Of God" — the life and work of Swami Shivananda, Sri Mahapurush Maharaj, is being published now with very few changes except the correction of some errors as well as the addition of a glossary and index. The late Dr. Douglas B. Soule, a San Francisco devotee, who had edited the manuscript of the first edition, was gracious enough before he passed away to go over a copy of the first edition carefully and correct the errors which previously escaped our notice. Swami Vandanananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California prepared a glossary of the Indian words, which, unexplained, are likely to be stumbling blocks to foreign readers. Dr. Allen Winslow, a New York devotee, who has since joined the monastery of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago kindly prepared the index. The author joins the publisher in acknowledging with thanks the labours of love of Dr. Soule, Swami Vandanananda and Dr. Winslow. We hope that the book in this improved form will be appreciated by readers in India and abroad.

October, 1968

FOREWORD

Here is the story of a saint. A 'natural' saint, one might call him. For, just as a few men in every age are born with a natural genius for science or the arts—a genius which manifests itself already in their earliest years — so also there are a few, a very few, who are born with spiritual genius. Swami Shivananda was one of these rare beings.

Mental conflict and struggle are, of course, inseparable from the practice of spiritual disciplines. The way to realization is always hard. Most men only achieve it after long periods of doubt and agony which are painful even when we merely read about them in a book. But when we read the life of a natural saint, a born spiritual genius, we can do so without pain, because the issue of his struggle seems certain even from the beginning. We know that he will win through.

Outwardly, Swami Shivananda led an intensely active life. As a young monk, he travelled all over India. As an elderly man, he became head of the world-wide Ramakrishna Order and was beset by the problems of a great and growing institution. Yet, inwardly, that life seems like a firm-set and abiding tower, based upon the rock of contemplation. The body wandered and wore itself out in service; the spirit remained calm and established. Very early, it had found its timeless home, and there it always reposed.

This book is something more than the biography of an individual. It deals also with one of the most vital of all questions: the function of spiritual power within human society. When a great teacher, a Christ or a Ramakrishna,

passes from the earth, he leaves behind him a group of followers who are determined to perpetuate the spirit of his teaching. Inevitably, this group forms itself into an order, a church, an organization. And here a danger arises. The teacher has proclaimed: ' My kingdom is not of this world ' . But the church which embodies his teaching is a physical entity with members, buildings, funds and a position in time and space. As it grows, it acquires potential political influence. And there will be many who will say that it should use this influence in human affairs, that it should intervene — with the aid of human weapons, if necessary — to protect and enlarge itself, here, in the physical world.

This deadly fallacy — which has cost the lives of millions throughout history, and which must lead, in the end, to the distortion and prostitution of the teacher's original message— was recognized and rejected by Swami Shivananda. Warmly as he sympathized with India's struggle for political liberation, deeply as he felt for the sufferings of her masses he knew that spiritual power is a universal function or it is nothing. It cannot be diverted to serve local political purposes, however admirable. It cannot be used to achieve material objectives. To his eternal honour, Swami Shivananda refused to exert the influence of the Ramakrishna Order in the sphere of politics, despite his admiration for Gandhiji's Non-Co-operation Movement. Gandhi had his own place and duty in the scheme of things, and he fulfilled it gloriously. But the man of contemplation, the vehicle of spiritual power, has another place and a different kind of duty. Swami Shivananda did not forget the words of the *Gita*: ' The duty of another will bring you into great spiritual danger ' .

If you visit one of those huge dams which control the outflow of a lake or a river, you can go down into the engine-

room and see the turbines, supplying electricity to an entire countryside. It is very quiet down there. The turbines seem motionless and almost silent. And yet water is rushing through them at a hundred miles an hour — a terrific force which, if it were checked, could shatter the whole dam to pieces. The great saints are like that: calm, impersonal, holding back nothing for themselves, existing only to transmit the tremendous spiritual power which rushes through them and gives light to the surrounding world.

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD



Belur Math
1924

CHAPTER I

SWAMI SHIVANANDA—HIS BACKGROUND, PERSONALITY, EARLY LIFE

DURING the first half of the nineteenth century, as an aftermath of the industrial revolution, material prosperity and colonization, the civilization of the West spread far and wide, and the effect of this on people's minds was, among other things, to unsettle their faith in God and all eternal values. As a result, discord and confusion of ideals were in evidence everywhere. India herself was about to be uprooted from her ancient way of life—her hoary spiritual culture and civilization. India, and for that matter the world at large, was standing at cross-roads, needing divine guidance. It was at this critical time that the great teacher Sri Ramakrishna was born (1836) in Bengal, India.

Constantly living in God and possessing profound spiritual understanding, Sri Ramakrishna was a God-man of the highest order. Even as a child he was aware of his divine mission. His purity, renunciation, consecration and compassion were unparalleled. He demonstrated the reality of God. He proved that nothing counts in life except God, and that in order to realize Him one must, by renouncing lust and greed, be spiritually reborn.

Into Sri Ramakrishna's life were crowded, as it were, the concentrated spiritual experiences of the Hindu race. Not satisfied with realizing God by following one method of spiritual discipline, he practised the various methods, bestknown in India, including Christianity and Islam, and by so doing discovered that all paths lead to the same Goal. His teachings regarding the basic unity and harmony of religions and his respect for each as a genuine path leading Godward were thus the fruits of his own direct personal experience.

Although born in a remote village, Sri Ramakrishna spent the greater part of his life in the precincts of a temple on the Ganga at Dakshineswar near Calcutta. Drawn by his irresistible saintliness, many seekers of Truth from different parts of India flocked to him for guidance. He blessed and helped each and all, according to their varying capacities and needs, but from among them he chose only a few to share in his most intimate spiritual experiences and plans. These he made the custodians of his teachings and the vehicles for the fulfilment of his mission, training them in the path of renunciation, service, spirituality. Before he passed away, he transmitted to them his wisdom and liberating power and bequeathed to them his great love which beheld God in every being. As a final act, he saw to it that they embraced monastic life and thus dedicated themselves to God and the service of man as God.

This inner group of disciples formed the nucleus of the monastic order called the Ramakrishna Math (Monastery), of which Swami Vivekananda was the

guiding spirit and leader. According to the specific instructions of the Master, Swami Vivekananda organized the Order and instituted its works of ministration for the upliftment of India and the world. As head of the Order, Swami Vivekananda, was succeeded by Swami Brahmananda and the latter by Swami Shivananda.

Sri Ramakrishna's disciples represented the different aspects of his multiple divine personality and, as such, were all unique characters. Swami Shivananda, with whose life and personality we are here concerned, was one of the direct disciples of the Master and held a truly prominent place among the founders of the Order.

Tall and handsome in appearance, noble and fearless in demeanour, Swami Shivananda had the majesty and bearing of a prince. He was indeed an inspiring figure as, dressed in his ochre robe, absorbed in his own thoughts, he would spiritedly pace up and down the monastery grounds.

Although his travels did not extend beyond the boundaries of India and Ceylon, the Swami was surprisingly cosmopolitan in his outlook and breadth of vision. Commanding great respect himself, he accorded the same to others. Straightforward in all his dealings, he stood for the dignity of man as man. Visitors even from distant countries felt at ease in talking with him and went away deeply impressed. King Albert of Belgium, remarked after meeting the Swami at the Belur Math, "For the first time . . . I have met one with whom I could talk as man to man."

In his relationships with others the Swami

always took the dispassionate view of an onlooker, paying little attention to externals. As full he was of human kindness, his sympathies for men knew no bounds. He would do anything to help them, overlooking their frailties and failings. As his monastic name implies, he possessed in a remarkable degree the qualities attributed to the great god Shiva—compassion, detachment, unconcern for praise or blame, same-sightedness, love of asceticism and contemplation. In early youth the driving force behind his actions was a strong urge to experience samadhi, the state of mystical union with God. It was the desire to attain this blissful state that drove him hither and thither, made him perform all kinds of austerities, and finally brought him to the feet of Sri Ramakrishna.

In the Ramakrishna Math the Swami was popularly known as Mahapurush or Mahapurushji, "Great Soul", a title of supreme reverence bestowed on one of unusual spiritual stature and excellence. It was Swami Vivekananda who gave him this title because of his Shiva-like dispassion and renunciation, his innate purity, strength of mind and will power.

Comparatively little is known of the Swami's life. Being by nature self-effacing and humble, he was extremely reticent about himself, rarely disclosing anything personal. Moreover, his was a life lived quietly, away from the limelight of the world. In his case, therefore, the information usually obtainable concerning men of eminence is for the most part lacking. Further, the greatness of Swami Shivananda lies pre-eminently in the

domain of the Spirit. We can naturally know little of what went on in his soul—how he felt and reacted. His aspirations, trials and struggles, and above all, his attainments and realizations, remain almost a sealed book.

The Swami's life may be said to consist of two main parts, each equally interesting and important. In the first, we see him as a seeker of Truth and a monk hungering for the Highest, losing himself in contemplation and meditation, growing in spiritual stature and wisdom and laying up treasures in the spiritual realm. In the second, he appears as a teacher of men, following in the footsteps of his Master, ceaselessly labouring for the enlightenment of others and giving away to them, for their peace and happiness, all that he had earned.

Swami Shivananda came of an influential brahmin family of Barasat in Bengal, India. The exact year of his birth is unknown. As is the Hindu custom, his parents had a horoscope cast, which contained the details of his birth and a forecast of his future career, but when he renounced the world, like a true monk he consigned the horoscope to the waters of the Ganga. He was born in the nineteenth century, presumably some time in the fifties, on the eleventh day of the dark fortnight of the Indian month Agrahayana (November-December). His name before joining the Order was Taraknath Ghoshal.

The Swami's father, Ram Kanai Ghoshal, was an astute lawyer with a lucrative practice. Unusually generous, he spent a great deal of money in serving holy men and taking care of needy students. His home at Barasat provided shelter and

food to as many as thirty boys. Later, when he gave up his legal practice and took the position of a deputy collector drawing a limited salary, he was compelled, against his heart's desire, to curtail his charities. Even to this day the people of Barasat speak highly of Ram Kanai and his generosity. In the midst of worldly success and prosperity he did not forget God, but maintained his sincere spiritual longing. In order to realize Divinity he performed various disciplines, and he was adept in some of the practices of the Shakta Tantra, a school of philosophy and religion which worships God as Shakti, the Divine Energy.

The Swami's mother, Vama Sundari Devi, was a noble, pious woman given to selfless service. Heartbroken at the premature death of her first son, Vama Sundari went to the famous Shiva temple at Tarakeswar near Calcutta and gave herself up to intensive austerities and devotions. Some time afterward the Swami was born, and the parents believed that he came in answer to her prayers. He was named Taraknath, or Tarak for short, after Tarakeswar Shiva.

Speaking in reminiscence of his parents, Tarak later in life said to some devotees:

“I recall little of the days when I was very young, but I do remember well that my father used to support many in his home. My mother used to cook for the family and serve the meals. She was fond of feeding people. In those days my father was in a position to engage cooks and servants, but my mother would not allow that. She did almost all the housework herself. She was an ideal woman, very simple in her ways.

Seeing her work hard, my father was often pained and expressed sympathy. To that she would reply, 'To be able to feed people is a great blessing. They are my children.' When I was nine years old my mother passed away. It was her custom to wear a heavy sari with a wide, red border. My uncle used to say that my mother never asked for anything, not even for clothes for herself. Other than this, I do not remember much."¹

Tarak received the best of care and affection from his parents. Noble, truthful, fearless and outspoken, as a child he was quite distinctive. Although talented, he cared little for his studies at school and showed a marked predilection for spirituality. Often he appeared serious and indrawn, shunning play and merriment. Something seemed to stir him from within; he would retire to a quiet spot and find delight in prayer and meditation. His companions and elders were mystified, failing to account for his strange moods. Upon those who knew him his unusual personality left a deep impression. For example, the headmaster of the Barasat school, where he had his early education, said reminiscently, "Tarak's character had such depth and purity that we were all charmed and impressed by it."

With adolescence Tarak's spiritual yearning increased a hundredfold; it was as if he were being consumed with the desire for God-realization. Going to Calcutta for studies, he, like most of the young Bengali seekers of Truth at that time, began to frequent the Brahma Samaj and became a regular

¹ *Shivananda Vani*, I

member. The Brahma Samaj was then under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen, whose soul-stirring sermons and rational approach to religion appealed to Tarak; but still he was not satisfied. He was in quest of a teacher who had realized God and expressed in life the highest ideals of spirituality.

When his father's income had become reduced, Tarak, in order to assist the family financially, was compelled to discontinue school and look for a job. He went to Delhi and was offered a position there. In this city he met a friend who showed great interest in spiritual matters, and they often discussed religion for hours at a time. One day Tarak asked this friend if he knew anything about samadhi, the state of mystical absorption in which man realizes his union with God. In reply the friend remarked that samadhi was a rare phenomenon, vouchsafed to very few, but that he knew one person, Sri Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar, who had attained this state. Tarak became extremely fascinated by the name of Sri Ramakrishna and eagerly looked forward to the day when he might meet the Master.

Shortly after this conversation Tarak returned to Calcutta, where he was offered a position with the mercantile firm of Machinnon, Mackenzie & Company. He still belonged to the Brahma Samaj and was attending its services regularly. Then by chance he met a friend who was a relative of Ram Chandra Datta, a householder devotee² of

² Sri Ramakrishna had both monastic and householder disciples. The monastic disciples renounced their hearth and home and everything

Sri Ramakrishna, and this friend told Tarak in detail about the Master, speaking highly of his renunciation, devotion and realization. Tarak felt that if only he could meet Sri Ramakrishna his desire for a guru or spiritual teacher—one who could teach him to plunge into the depths of his own soul and see God face to face—would be fulfilled.

for God and formed the nucleus of the monastic order that bears his name. The householder disciples remained in the world, taking care of their families and trying to live a dedicated, selfless life.

CHAPTER II

AT THE FEET OF THE MASTER

IT was towards the end of 1880 or at the beginning of 1881 that Swami Shivananda, then called Tarak, had the blessed privilege of meeting the Master. Hearing that Sri Ramakrishna was to be at Ram Chandra Datta's home on a certain evening, he lost no time in going there. The Master was seated in a crowded room, talking in a semi-conscious state to the assembled devotees. Tarak was overjoyed when he saw the radiant figure of Sri Ramakrishna, and he listened with rapt attention to every word that fell from his lips.

It should be of interest to quote here Tarak's own account of his spiritual inclinations as a boy and of his first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna, as written in a letter to Romain Rolland:

“ Even as a child I had an inherent tendency towards spiritual life and an innate feeling that enjoyment was not the object of life. As I grew in age and experience these two ideas took a firmer hold on my mind. I went about the city of Calcutta, seeking knowledge of God among its various religious societies and temples. But I could not find real satisfaction anywhere ; none of them emphasized the beauty of renunciation, nor could I discover a single man among them who was possessed of true spiritual wisdom. Then, in 1880 or 1881, I heard about Sri Rama-



krishna and went to see him in the house of one of his devotees at Calcutta. This was the time when Swami Vivekananda and those other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who afterwards renounced the world to carry on his divine mission, had begun to gather around him. On the first day of my visit I saw Sri Ramakrishna passing into samadhi; and when he returned to normal consciousness he spoke in detail about samadhi and its nature. I felt in my inmost heart that here was a man who had indeed realized God.”¹

This first visit made such a profound impression upon Tarak that he resolved to see the Master again the following Saturday. Not knowing the location of Dakshineswar, he took a friend with him, and they somehow managed to arrive there. It was then dusk and the evening services were about to begin. Entering the paved courtyard of the temple, Tarak looked everywhere for Sri Ramakrishna. Finally he discovered him seated in his room, and the moment he saw him he was overcome with indescribable emotion. He felt as if in the form of the Master the Divine Mother Herself were seated in front of him.

After the preliminary greetings, Sri Ramakrishna asked Tarak if he had seen him the previous Saturday at the house of Ram Chandra in Calcutta, and Tarak replied in the affirmative. Then the Master asked, “In what do you believe, in God with form or without?” “In God without form,” replied Tarak humbly. “But,” said the Master,

¹ When Romain Rolland was writing *The Prophets of the New India* a biography of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, he corresponded with Swami Shivananda for data and information.—Taken from *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna*.

“You can’t help admitting also the Mother, the Divine Energy, who manifests Herself in many forms.”

Very soon Sri Ramakrishna rose from his seat and, asking Tarak to follow, proceeded towards the Kali temple. The peal of bells and gong indicated that the evening services had just begun, and the atmosphere was surcharged with an air of unusual solemnity and devotion. Arriving at the Mother’s temple, Sri Ramakrishna prostrated himself before the image. As a member of the Brahma Samaj, which advocates belief only in the formless God and is opposed to His worship in images, Tarak was at first hesitant to follow the Master’s example. Suddenly the thought flashed across his mind: “Why should I have such petty ideas? God is omnipresent. If He is everywhere, He must certainly be in the stone image as well as in other places.” Thinking thus, he bowed reverently before the image of the Mother.

Sri Ramakrishna, with his remarkable insight into human nature, recognized Tarak’s spiritual potentialities. “Stay here tonight,” he asked. “You can’t gain any lasting benefit by the chance visit of a day. You must come here often.” But Tarak had already arranged to spend the night with a friend in the neighbourhood, and so begged to be excused. He took leave of the Master, promising to return the next evening. When, true to his word, Tarak came again, the Master expressed his pleasure by asking that he get him a little ice; it is considered a singular blessing when a holy man allows anyone to do him a personal

service. Since Tarak did not know where to find any ice, he appealed to a friend acquainted with a certain householder of the name of Surendra who was a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. This man knew how to procure the ice and did so.

From that time on, drawn by the Master's love, Tarak visited him frequently. Sometimes he spent weekends at Dakshineswar, and an intimacy, which deepened increasingly, sprang up between them. One day Sri Ramakrishna said to Tarak: "Look here, I don't ordinarily inquire about the family background of anyone who comes here. I only look into his heart and read his feelings. In your case, the very sight of you has made me realize that you belong here, and I have a desire to know something of your father and people at home."² Tarak thereupon told the Master all about his father and family.

It so happened that Ram Kanai, Tarak's father, had been a legal adviser to Rani Rasmani, the founder of the Kali temple of Dakshineswar, and that he had become acquainted with Sri Ramakrishna during a visit to the temple on business matters. He had conceived a profound regard for the Master and whenever he came to Dakshineswar had never missed an opportunity to see him. At one time, because of certain intense spiritual practices, Sri Ramakrishna had suffered from an acute burning sensation all over his body, and the various remedies he tried proved inefficacious. One day he had asked Ram Kanai to suggest a cure. The latter at once had an *Ishta-kavacha*³ made for him,

² *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

³ An amulet containing the name of the wearer's chosen Deity.

recommending that he wear it on his arm. By following his instructions the Master had gained relief.

Sri Ramakrishna was very much surprised to learn that Ram Kanai was Tarak's father, and asked the young man to tell him to visit him soon. Some time later Ram Kanai arrived, and, as he saluted Sri Ramakrishna, the Master in an ecstatic state blessed him by placing his foot on his head. That magic touch caused Ram Kanai to experience a sudden upsurge of great spiritual joy, whereat he burst into tears.

One day, perhaps during Tarak's third or fourth visit to Dakshineswar, the Master gave him spiritual initiation in his own unique way. Taking him aside, the Master asked him to put out his tongue, and then with his finger he wrote something on it. The act had a strange effect on the boy's mind. Suddenly the gross world of sense apparently melted to nothing before his very eyes, and he was overwhelmed with an inexpressible sensation. Indrawn and abstracted, he seemed to be lost in deep meditation—a state of samadhi.

Having through the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, glimpsed the inner world Tarak wanted to dive into it deeper and deeper. His mental state at this time can best be described in his own words:

“ I often felt like weeping before the Master. One night standing in front of the Kali temple I wept profusely. Not finding me around, the Master became concerned and began looking for me. When I came he said : ‘ God favours those who cry for Him. Tears thus shed wash away the sins of former births.’ Another day I was

meditating at the Panchavati, the sacred grove of five trees. The Master came there, and the moment he looked at me I burst into tears. He stood still without uttering a word. A sort of creeping sensation passed through me and I began to tremble all over. The Master congratulated me on attaining this state and said that it was the outcome of divine emotion. Then he took me to his room and gave me something to eat.”⁴

With the passing of days Tarak became more and more convinced that he had at last found one who could safely guide him across life's stormy waters to the Haven of Peace. The world lost all attraction for him; earthly ties relaxed their grip. Indifferent to things external, he paid little attention to his clothes and appearance; often he would be found in abstracted moods. To avoid having his attention diverted unnecessarily from spiritual practice, and to cultivate greater self-control, he used to walk with lowered eyes. The following reminiscence of an older acquaintance corroborates this fact:

“One day while passing along a street in Calcutta I saw Tarak going to the Ganga to bathe. I called him by name, but he did not answer. Feeling hurt, I spoke of the incident to a mutual friend, saying that Tarak had treated me rudely. The friend said, ‘You are misjudging him. Tarak is now a disciple of the Paramahansa at Dakshineswar. He has made God-realization the only aim of his life and remains always absorbed in the thought of God. The next time you meet him, please go up and talk to him. You will find that he is not discourteous at all.’ Afterwards I met Tarak again. He was going along in an absorbed mood, but the moment I came face to face with

⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

him, he called out, 'Oh, Uncle Uncle' and saluted me with great respect, asking how I was. When I looked at his face and eyes, I knew they were marked with the deep impress of spirituality."⁵

Tarak realized that in Sri Ramakrishna all the ideals he had cherished in his past were fully manifest. He felt that the Master was the fulfilment not only of Vedanta, or Hinduism as it is sometimes called, but of all religions, and that to know him was to know God. With the growth of this conviction, Tarak dedicated his body, mind and soul at Sri Ramakrishna's feet.

Sri Ramakrishna was a master craftsman, remarkably skilled in handling human material and fashioning it to the best advantage. His was a technique peculiarly his own. The keynote of his training was love, by means of which he conquered the hearts of his disciples. Thus, he made Tarak his own by his immeasurable love, in comparison with which the affection of Tarak's parents seemed insignificant.

Nothing brings out better the depth of the Swami's devotion for Sri Ramakrishna than the following excerpts from a letter written by him to a devotee:

" I have not yet come to a final understanding whether he was man or superman, a god or God Himself. But I have known him to be a man of complete self-effacement, master of the highest renunciation, possessed of supreme wisdom, and the very incarnation of love ; and as with the passing of days I am getting better and better

⁵ *The Voice of India*, January, 1946.

acquainted with the domain of spirituality and feeling the infinite extent and depth of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual moods, the conviction is growing in me that to compare him with God, as God is popularly understood, would be minimizing and lowering his supreme greatness. I have seen him showering his love equally on men and women, on the learned and the ignorant, on saints and sinners, and evincing earnest and unceasing solicitude for the relief of their misery and for their attainment of infinite peace by realizing the Divine. And I dare say that the world has not seen another man of his type in modern times, so devoted to the welfare of mankind."⁶

Believing in the innate divinity of man, Sri Ramakrishna gave reasonable freedom to each disciple letting him grow in his own way. Any attempt to disturb a person's inherent make-up or destroy his individuality by thrusting upon him practices and disciplines foreign to his nature was considered sacrilegious by the Master. But like a watchful mother he kept his eye upon each disciple and noted the details of his everyday conduct, admonishing and correcting, encouraging and helping whenever necessary.

For some time past Tarak had been keenly feeling the need of being in a place where he might be able to direct his energies with less distraction to spiritual pursuits. Naturally his joy knew no bounds when Sri Ramakrishna one day asked him to come and stay with him for a while at Dakshineswar. He considered this invitation a god send and moved there at once. This was towards the end of 1882, and although his stay was brief he

⁶ *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.*

made the most of it by availing himself of every opportunity to associate himself closely with the Master, serving him and learning from him. Regarding his association with Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, Tarak once said: "How fortunate we are! We have served the Master and we have received so much love and affection from him! Infinite was his compassion and love for us."⁷ Again he said: "In those days we used to sleep on the floor of his room. At bedtime the Master would tell us how to lie down. He would say that if we lay flat on our back and then visualized the Mother in our heart while falling asleep, we would have spiritual dreams. He asked us to think of spiritual things while going to sleep."⁸ As night time is ideal for spiritual practice, Sri Ramakrishna asked Tarak and other disciples to spend it to the best advantage. After they had rested a bit, he would rouse them from sleep and send them to different places in the garden where they could meditate for hours. Then, towards dawn, they came in from the garden for a little more rest.

Sri Ramakrishna's training was not limited to formal instructions and disciplines, his very presence acted as a constant stimulus to the spiritual growth of those who were with him. He had the genius of turning any situation, however trivial, into an occasion for spiritual communion and blessedness. Under the leaf canopy of the temple garden and in the quiet atmosphere of his room, the schooling of Tarak and other disciples went on amid

⁷⁻⁸ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

fun, laughter, animated conversation, singing and ecstasy.

In moments of doubt and dullness Tarak was accustomed to approach the Master for help, and the Master would quicken his slackening spirit. Doubts were dispelled, giving place to conviction, and there ensued great spiritual fervour and ineffable peace. Regarding the power of the Master, the Swami once stated:

“Sri Ramakrishna had the power to transmit spirituality to others, and he could lift one’s mind to higher levels of consciousness. He did this by a thought, will-power or touch. Swami Vivekananda, as well as others and I, used to visit the Master frequently. Through his grace, all of us, according to our individual capacities, had opportunities to ascend higher flights of knowledge. I myself had the good fortune to experience samadhi three times during his lifetime because of his touch and wish. I am still living today to prove his great spiritual power. It was not a delusion or a dream, because these experiences brought about unique and lasting changes in our character.”⁹

From Dakshineswar Sri Ramakrishna often went to Calcutta, and during these visits he stopped at the homes of some of his householder devotees. His visits brought together the different disciples, and then there were devotional singing, reading, talks and discussions. Ram Chandra Datta’s home at Calcutta, where Tarak had first met the Master, was one of Sri Ramakrishna’s favourite places, and it was at his suggestion that Tarak moved there. The room he occupied was small and bare, but he

⁹ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

was very happy because he had the close association of Sri Ramakrishna and his devotees. His needs were few and he lived a very austere life, cooking his own food. About his life there Tarak said later: "At Ram Babu's home I was in such a mental state that I didn't pay any attention to food and other physical comforts, being satisfied with what was absolutely necessary for keeping the body and soul together. Most of the time I ate only once a day and that too the simplest food, consisting of rice and one or two vegetables. I didn't care for delicacies at all."¹⁰ Again he said: "Most nights I spent in the Beadon Square, Hadua or some adjacent park, in meditation. Sometimes I visited the cremation grounds at Keoratala or some secluded spot in or around the temple at Kalighat, practising austerities."¹¹

It was not long before the noise and bustle of the metropolitan area of Calcutta became too distracting for Tarak, and he moved to the garden house of Ram Chandra at Kankurgachhi, in those days a deeply wooded, secluded, outlying district. It was like being in an ancient hermitage, an ideal sylvan retreat, and Tarak seemed there to be in his element. Regarding his life at Kankurgachhi he once said reminiscently: "I was so happy there all by myself! For dinner I used to procure from the neighbourhood a little rice and one or two simple dishes. For supper I prepared over the open dhuni fire (a ceremonial fire generally used for warmth and sometimes for simple cooking) a

¹⁰⁻¹¹ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

few pieces of unleavened bread and roasted one or two green bananas. And I ate only these, washing them down with drinks of water. Day and night I used to be absorbed in my spiritual practice beside the dhuni fire, and right there snatched my sleep and rest. As very few were in the garden I didn't have any distraction. The fire would sometimes attract snakes, but for some reason or other they moved away, avoiding me."¹²

The austerities that Tarak practised at this time told upon his body and he became very thin, but that did not deter him from his usual pursuit. Within him burned an indomitable spiritual longing and fervour, his eyes radiating a tender glow, his voice very sweet, his demeanour unusually affable. Every now and then whenever he got the opportunity he used to visit the Master at Dakshineswar, going all the way on foot. He generally went on week days, occasionally spending the night there, avoiding Saturdays, Sundays and holy days, when there were sure to be crowds of visitors and devotees at the temple.

During this period he went on a short pilgrimage to Vrindavan, the place associated with Sri Krishna and his pastoral life, and there he stayed for some time. On his return he went to see the Master, carrying with him the sacred dust and prasad which he had brought with him from the holy city.

Some time previously, in a semi-conscious spiritual state, the Master had had an accident which caused him great discomfort. Naturally, Tarak

¹² *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

became very much concerned when he learned about it, and on his arrival at the temple he asked the Master about his physical condition. In reply Sri Ramakrishna smilingly said: "One night, out in the garden as I was looking at the moon, my feet became entangled in the wire fence, and I fell down, fracturing my wrist. The after-effect is still there, and they have bandaged me tightly. They refuse to take the bandage off. I can hardly call on my Divine Mother with comfort. Tell me, does one enjoy calling on the Mother in such a predicament? Sometimes I feel 'What nonsense is this! Let me out of this body, snapping all ties!' Then again I think, 'No, let the pleasant play of the Mother continue. There is fun in this too'."¹³ After hearing this, Tarak remarked, "Why don't you cure yourself? You can certainly heal yourself if you so wish." "Yes, so I can!" replied the Master, and then after keeping silent for a moment he added, "No, aches and pains of sickness are preferable. Sickness scares away worldly people visiting here with ulterior motives, and I am left alone." Next moment he seemed to be overcome with a deep spiritual emotion and said, as if he were talking with the Mother, "Mother, that's a very clever device of Thine." Saying this he sang a devotional song, in the course of which he was plunged into a deep samadhi. Tarak went again sometime later to see the Master and found him stamping up and down like a petulant child, speaking to the Mother of the universe in an

¹³ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

ecstatic mood: "Mother, how wouldst Thou know the pangs of embodiment! Thou wert never born!"

Attracted by the unusual seclusion of the place, some wandering monks occasionally dropped in at the garden at Kankurgachhi, stopping there for a few days. While narrating the story of one such monk, Tarak once said: "A sadhu from Northern India came to the garden and stayed there for a few days. He was of a very gentle disposition, extremely reserved. He used to have his meditation seat right under a tree beside the path leading to the garden. Most probably Ram Babu used to supply his food and other necessities, and on one occasion as he mentioned this sadhu to Sri Ramakrishna, the Master said, 'Why not bring the holy man here some day?' So Ram Babu hired a carriage and brought the sadhu to Dakshineswar. The Master received the man kindly in his room and asked him to sit on the small cot, himself sitting by his side. The conversation turned on spiritual matters—God and related topics. Gradually they came to discuss samadhi, both savikalpa and nirvikalpa. As the Master was describing nirvikalpa samadhi, he became all of a sudden perfectly still, lost in that very state himself, one of his feet resting on the cot, the other hanging out beside it. The sadhu mistakenly thought that Sri Ramakrishna was just getting ready for his meditation. Finding him in that position and wishing him to sit properly, as one would ordinarily do, the sadhu started saying, 'Why not sit right in a meditative posture?' Who could listen to the man's repeated remonstrances? Sri Ramakrishna

seemed to have reached a state of consciousness far above the body and the senses."¹⁴ And then Tarak added: "How can one appraise the Master's samadhi? Nobody knew when, how, and in what conditions he would have it. By looking at him one couldn't have any idea about his samadhi. When would he not have it? In bed, apparently dreaming or sleeping, why, at all times, under all conditions, samadhi was natural with him."¹⁵

A brief explanatory note on samadhi, in which Sri Ramakrishna was a past master, would not be out of place here. Samadhi is a mystical experience unlike any other experience; it has its types and grades. Broadly speaking, it is a state of ineffable peace and blessedness climaxed by the realization of one's union with God, the Indwelling Spirit. It comes to a person through divine grace as the fruit of his sincere prayer, meditation and other devotional exercises. It is termed savikalpa samadhi, when the mind, alert and serene, is filled with an unbroken stream of thoughts on God, accompanied by a deep awareness of His presence. Practised long and faithfully, it culminates in what is called nirvikalpa samadhi—a superconscious state in which one realizes one's full identity with the Supreme Spirit, even as the many rivers merge themselves in the waters of the ocean. It may fitly be described as the last word of spiritual experience, synonymous with perfection, illumination and freedom—freedom from all bondages including the cycle of births and deaths. Nirvikalpa samadhi is transcendental in nature, because

¹⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

¹⁵ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

it is beyond the reach of the senses and mind, beyond time, space and causation, as well as name and form—a state in which even the triad of the knower, the knowable and knowledge is dissolved. In order to reach this rarefied height of mystical excellence, one has to rise above the limitations of body and mind and be spiritually reborn by lifting the veil of ignorance. Ordinarily, a person established in nirvikalpa samadhi may live in that ecstatic condition for twenty-one days, unaware of and unaffected by the illusory world of phenomena, giving up his body at the end of that short period, even as a tree drops a fruit that is fully ripe. There are some rare souls who choose to live longer after this experience, bringing knowledge and peace to countless seekers. These are, indeed, the salt of the earth.

Family circumstances compelled Tarak to marry. Born with monastic instincts, he considered the tie of marriage a great hindrance. Through the grace of the Lord, however, he did not lose heart, but rather mustered courage and strength. Not for a moment did he permit pleasures of the senses or worldly considerations to compromise the ideal—the vision of God. The few years of his marital life were characterized by absolute dispassion and continence. This became possible because of Sri Ramakrishna's divine influence and his own innate purity and firmness of purpose, as well as the spiritual disposition of his wedded wife, Nityakali Devi. With a sense of higher values, Nityakali, as long as she lived, tried to follow in the footsteps of her saintly husband, without ever

standing in his way. In the latter part of 1883 she suddenly fell ill and after suffering for a few days passed away in the prime of her life. With sincere prayers for the eternal rest of his departed wife, Tarak performed the last rites and other obligatory duties. Soon afterwards he gave up his worldly position and resolved to take the momentous step—the formal renunciation of the world, while Sri Ramakrishna was still living. First, he went to his father and disclosed his wish to him. Ram Kanai was deeply moved, as any father would be, and asked Tarak to follow him to the family shrine and bow before the Deity. Then, placing his hand upon his son's head, he blessed him profusely, saying: "May you realize God! I myself have tried. I even thought of renouncing the world, but that was not to be. I pray that you may find God." Much pleased, Tarak went straight to Dakshineswar and narrating the incident revealed to Sri Ramakrishna his plan for renunciation. The Master, of course, rejoiced, acted as if he had known everything beforehand, and gave his hearty and final approval.

Long afterwards, at the house of Balaram Bose, a householder devotee, the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were discussing the practicality of continence in married life. Naren (Swami Vivekananda) remarked that continence is rare in that life, Sri Ramakrishna's case being an exception. Tarak, who was also present, rejoined humbly that through the grace of the Master it had been possible in his life too. Naren congratulated Tarak, saying: "Then certainly you are a Mahapurush." It was

following this occasion that Tarak was called Mahapurush or Mahapurushji by his brother disciples and others in the Order.

In 1885 Sri Ramakrishna showed symptoms of cancer of the throat, and when his illness became serious he was moved for treatment to a garden house in Cossipore near Calcutta. Naturally, Tarak and the other intimate disciples became extremely concerned and availed themselves of every opportunity to serve the Master to the best of their ability. At first, they would come from their respective homes in Calcutta to visit the garden house and do the nursing, returning home every night for sleep and rest. Later, as the illness demanded constant vigilance and care, most of the disciples, including Tarak, remained continuously at the garden house.

About the life at the Cossipore garden Tarak said later:

“Sri Ramakrishna was then seriously ill and was staying at the Cossipore garden for treatment. Most of us were also staying there to nurse the Master. Day and night we waited by turns upon him without any let or hindrance, having our meals right there. Surendra, a well-to-do householder devotee, arranged for everything.

“A cook was engaged to do the cooking, but when the cook fell ill we had to cook by turns. Our meals were very plain, the menu consisting of rice or unleavened bread, lentil, vegetable hash, soup, or similar dishes. We were in such a mental condition that we didn't pay any attention to food at all, we ate whatever we could get. In the first place, the Master was so sick, and then we were all so deeply absorbed in severe spiritual disciplines.

“ One night it was my turn to cook for the household. As I was doing the final flavouring of the vegetable hash, the flavour of food spread all over the house and reached the Master upstairs. He asked the nearby attendant, ‘ Hello! What are you cooking? Excellent! The aroma of the flavouring is everywhere! Who is the cook?’ When he learned that I was the cook he said, ‘ Go and bring me a little of it ;’ and he tasted a tiny bit of the hash. Because of the cancer in his throat he could hardly swallow anything. He would with great difficulty eat a little cream of wheat cooked in milk. Most of the time even that he would not be able to swallow.

“ Because of his repeated spiritual experiences the Master had hardly any consciousness of the external world. How happily we passed our days serving Sri Ramakrishna and practising austerities at the Cossipore garden! The Master seemed to have taken upon himself this sickness in order to gather us together and lay the foundation of his Order to be. Inscrutable are the ways of a Divine Incarnation.”¹⁶

During the last days of his illness Sri Ramakrishna suffered excruciating pain, although mentally he was very cheerful and went frequently into the ecstasies of samadhi. Even while lying in bed he continued his spiritual ministrations, helping devotees, shaping the character of his boy disciples and spurring them on towards the realization of the Ideal.

At the Cossipore garden Sri Ramakrishna, although seriously ill and very weak, was at the height of his spiritual glory. On New Year’s Day 1886, a red-letter day for the devotees, he felt a little

¹⁶ *Shivananda Vani*, II.

better and was out in the garden. In an ecstatic state he touched many devotees who happened to be there and gave them extraordinary spiritual experiences that filled them with supreme bliss. Later at Belur, in reminiscence, Tarak told of the following incident:

“At that time the Master’s condition took a critical turn, and we developed an intense spiritual longing and dispassion in our hearts. The Master was so ill that by turns we had to be by his side, nursing him day and night for twenty-four hours. The householder devotees used to visit the garden during the day time, according to their convenience, arranging for his treatment, diet and expenses, but we took the complete responsibility for his nursing. Along with the nursing we carried on severe spiritual disciplines. The Master encouraged us in this direction, instructing each according to his temperament and need as well as inquiring as to how we progressed in our meditations and spiritual experiences. At night Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) would get us together and engage us in meditation around a dhuni fire. Sometimes we practised kirtan—devotional group singing. We would thus spend the whole night in great joy, caring for the Master or meditating. As we had to keep awake at night, almost all of us took a short nap after dinner at noon.

“That day after dinner we were sleeping as usual in the little room adjoining the hall downstairs. The Master came down for the first time that afternoon and went out for a short walk. It being a holiday, many devotees were present in the garden. Finding the Master strolling along, the devotees followed him in great joy. As the Master slowly walked towards the gate, Girish

Babu¹⁷ prostrated himself at his feet and with folded hands began chanting a hymn addressed to him. While listening to the hymn bespeaking Girish's extraordinary faith and devotion, the Master was plunged into samadhi in a standing posture. Finding him lost in ecstasy the devotees in great joy started shouting 'Glory unto Sri Ramakrishna! Glory unto Sri Ramakrishna!' while saluting him again and again. Gradually as Sri Ramakrishna's mind came down to a semi-conscious state, he cast a benign glance at the devotees and said, 'What shall I say? May you all attain illumination!' As he uttered these words the hearts of all present were flooded, as it were, by an unspeakable blessedness. In that state the Master by his touch brought illumination in succession to each and all, who were there, by saying, 'May you be illumined!' By his divine touch all felt within themselves a remarkably exalted experience. As a result, some became absorbed in meditation, some began to dance in joy, some started to cry, while still others began singing his glory like madmen. That was indeed an extraordinary phenomenon.

"The Master stood there as a witness enjoying the whole thing. The commotion thus created roused us boy disciples from our sleep, and as we ran to the scene of the occurrence we saw the devotees in a frenzy standing in a circle around the Master. By the time we arrived, Sri Ramakrishna had come down to the normal state, but the devotees were still caught in the intoxication of that blessedness. Later by inquiry we found out that all of them had had unique experiences, the after-effect of which lasted for a long time. Why shouldn't it be so by his touch? He was God Himself. That day the Master refrained from touching one or two saying, 'Not now, you

¹⁷ A householder devotee, a poet-dramatist of great fame.

will have it later.' That proves that nothing can be achieved until one is ready for it. One must bide one's time."¹⁸

In order to broaden their spiritual outlook, the Master often encouraged his disciples to study the different scriptures of the world and interpret them as so many readings of the one Ultimate Truth. Some of the disciples, as a result, became interested in Buddhism, and their discussions on that subject continued for days at the Cossipore garden house. The story of Buddha's great renunciation, fortitude and compassion, and particularly the idea of his rational approach to Truth, fascinated Tarak, Naren, and Kali (later Swami Abhedananda) so much that they decided to visit Bodh Gaya, the place where Buddha had attained illumination. Tarak paid the train fare and they started on their journey.

Arriving at Bodh Gaya, they spent days in meditation under the famous Bodhi tree where Buddha had sat with grim resolution, determined not to leave his seat until he had realized the Truth. The place associated with the hallowed memory of Buddha's enlightenment filled them with inspiration. One evening as they were in meditation Naren became deeply absorbed and experienced great spiritual fervour. Overwhelmed with emotion, he burst into tears and tenderly embraced Tarak, who sat beside him and was also deep in meditation. There is a tradition in the Ramakrishna Math that Naren acted as he did because, in meditation, he saw the great Buddha enter into

¹⁸ *Shivananda Vani*, II.

Tarak. At the conclusion of their stay at Bodhi Gaya, the three young men returned to the Cossipore garden house.

In the philosophy and religion of Buddha no definite statement is made about the existence of God. When Ananda, Buddha's foremost disciple, asked him specifically if God exists or not, he evaded the issue. As a matter of fact, Buddha was silent as to whether there is a permanent substance, called the soul or self, back of one's changing sensations and experiences. Being primarily interested in the elimination of rebirth and its attendant pain, Buddha gave his attention to the eradication of desire—the cause of rebirth—and therefore stressed the practice of certain ethical principles and the importance of daily conduct. Buddha's argument was: so long as the existence of God or soul cannot be proved by reason, why waste time and energy in being concerned about it? This accounts for the fact that Buddhism is sometimes mistakenly thought to be synonymous with atheism or nihilism.

In his youth, Tarak preferred to think of God as a formless entity, a preference which is evidenced by his early connection with the Brahmo Samaj. Even after meeting the Master, Tarak continued to think of God in this way, and soon he developed a taste for the path of knowledge, jnana yoga, which has for its goal the elimination of all relative categories and the attainment of complete identity with Brahman, the Absolute. Speaking of his meditations in this regard, he once said: "I sit in the midst of infinite space and meditate on the formless

and attributeless Brahman. I do not allow any thought to arise in my mind, and I exist as the Witness.”¹⁹

Consequently, we can imagine that Buddhism, with its silence regarding soul and Personal God, would appeal to Tarak, and that he would carry its study and practice to its logical limit. Describing the state of his mind at that time, he said later:

“In those days I didn’t believe in the existence of God. . . . It seemed to me that the thought even of God would not allow the mind to be free from modifications. It was not that I just expressed myself that way ; my meditations and experiences were of that nature. I couldn’t think otherwise in those days ; I was so absorbed in those ideas. Some devotees brought the matter to the notice of the Master, who remarked, ‘What he says is also true. There is a stage in spiritual life when the seeker does not admit the existence of God.’ This tendency of mine lasted quite long—even after we moved to the monastery at Baranagore, subsequent to the death of the Master. . . . One day the Master appeared to me and said, ‘Well, the guru is all in all. There is no one higher than the guru.’ The moment I had this vision, these ideas left me, never to return.”²⁰

In the course of time, because of the influence of Sri Ramakrishna, Tarak’s consciousness expanded and he outgrew this phase of his spiritual life. From that period on he recognized the all-comprehensive nature of Reality and the multiplicity of the approaches to It.

¹⁹ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

²⁰ *Shivananda Vani, I.*

CHAPTER III

AUSTERITIES AND PILGRIMAGES

IN August, 1886, Sri Ramakrishna entered mahasamadhi or final release from the body, and Tarak and the other disciples who had gathered at his feet were thrown into an ocean of grief. The Master was the idol of their hearts, their unfailing source of inspiration and strength, their only refuge and support. For a time they seemed to be lost, but very soon through actual spiritual experience they realized that death is like passing from one room to another, and so peace came to them, for they knew that the Master had just gone from a little room into the wider courtyard. The divine power that, as Sri Ramakrishna, had worked visibly in the flesh, guiding, encouraging and blessing them, had departed from the mortal plane to function invisibly and more extensively in the subtler spiritual realm, and they felt his protecting arms in the hours of their trials and difficulties.

The young disciples, who while serving him at Cossipore, had been preparing themselves for the life of renunciation under the direction of Sri Ramakrishna, after his death grouped together at a rented house at Baranagore, near Calcutta, and thus within three months was established the initial monastery of the Ramakrishna Order. Tarak and Gopal Senior were the first to join the monastery, and the rest soon followed. The

disciples who had received the ochre cloth from Sri Ramakrishna, now, following his death, formally took the monastic vow by performing the time-honoured ritual of *viraja homa* and were ordained monks. Old names reminiscent of the families and past were discarded for new, monastic names. Tarak was named Swami Shivananda because of his Shiva-like nature. Naren, the leader and counsellor of the group, now Swami Vivekananda, with his keen intellect and profound spiritual understanding and realization, was the interpreter of the Master's teachings and the ideals for which he stood.¹

In order to fill the void created by the Master's death, these monks spent long hours in prayer and meditation. They lived very austerely, denying themselves the amenities of life. Study, discussion, and group-singing were also a part of their routine. Sometimes, feeling the need to break away from

¹ Here is a complete list of the disciples who took the monastic vow, along with their monastic names:

Naren	Swami Vivekananda
Rakhal	Swami Brahmananda
Yogin	Swami Yogananda
Niranjana	Swami Niranjanananda
Baburam	Swami Premananda
Latu	Swami Adbhutananda
Hari	Swami Turiyananda
Tarak	Swami Shivananda
Sarat	Swami Saradananda
Shashi	Swami Ramakrishnananda
Subodh	Swami Subodhananda
Kali	Swami Abhedananda
Sarada	Swami Trigunatitananda
Gangadhar	Swami Akhandananda
Gopal Senior	Swami Advaitananda

Hari Prasanna who joined later, became Swami Vijnanananda.

familiar associations, they would go out, individually or in groups, from the monastery and seek some holy place or secluded spot, where they could enjoy divine communion undisturbed. The joy and peace they felt within were ample compensation for hardships and privations.

The itinerant life of a monk had great fascination for Tarak, now Swami Shivananda, but he had to control himself and for a while live a more or less settled life. Immediately after the Master's death he made another pilgrimage to Vrindavan, and from there he moved leisurely to Benares, the city of Shiva. There is no doubt that this pilgrimage did the Swami immense good. He enjoyed his visits to the various temples, and the age-old associations of the two places filled his mind with great spiritual fervour. He stayed in Vrindavan for about a month and in Benares perhaps a little longer, living his life of preference, waiting for divine guidance as to his next step. Then the call came from Swami Vivekananda, asking him to come down to Baranagore and help him organize the newly founded monastery. Mahapurush readily hastened there and for a while stuck to his post, doing his part amidst trying conditions. Primarily, his was an intensive meditative life at the monastery. Not satisfied with the experiences and realizations already attained, he wished to plunge deeper and deeper within himself, seeking greater and more permanent gain in the realm of the Spirit. At the time he seemed to be consumed by a spiritual hunger that knew no satiety.

The following is a graphic picture of Mahapurushji's mental state and that of a brother, as drawn by an eye-witness:²

“It was one afternoon, in August or September. Very few were at the monastery; most of the inmates were out as itinerant monks. The sound of drizzling rain, falling upon tree-tops, wafted by the breeze, intensified the silence of the desolate monastery grounds. In the large dormitory were resting the Swamis Shivananda and Saradananda. Both of them were very quiet, lying in a half-reclining posture. Swami Shivananda seemed deeply engrossed in his own thoughts, solemn and serene, his eyes bedimmed with tears. So also was Swami Saradananda. After a while Mahapurush broke the silence, saying, ‘Sarat (Swami Saradananda), would you please play the drum while I sing?’ Then straightening himself up he sat down and sang the following lines of a song that was once voiced by Radha pining for Sri Krishna:

‘Gone is the Lord to the city of Mathura—
He, the light of my eyes, the delight of my
soul!

I, a sheltered woman, left stranded,
Like a wilted wreath of Malati.

Gone with the Beloved is joy of life,
All I have is anguish of the heart!’

“So sweetly and with such feeling did the Swami sing the song that I was deeply moved. Even the monastery building seemed to have caught the pathos that was in the air and was weeping in sympathy. All the joy and happiness of life seemed to have disappeared with the Dear One! That was the burden of the song. Both the Swamis were weeping, and amidst sobs

² Mahendranath Datta in his reminiscences of Mahapurush in the Bengali book, entitled, *Srimat Swami Shivananda Maharajer Anudhyan*.

and tears the song went on for a while, broken occasionally by silence when singing became impossible because of the excess of feeling. That day I saw re-enacted, right in front of my eyes, the drama of Radha's lamentation caused by her separation from Sri Krishna. The storm of spiritual longing and unrest that had been raging within the breasts of these two brothers found expression in their sobs and tears. It was typical of the other monastic disciples too."

For about two years and a half the Swami lived quietly at Baranagore, integrating his own spiritual life and helping towards the consolidation of the young Order. In those days he was so saturated with feelings of dispassion that nothing seemed to matter, not even physical necessities and comforts. Naturally, one would think that it was difficult for him to perform duties which would take him away from his strictly spiritual pursuit. A monastery, in addition to its inner life of austerity and meditation, has its outer trappings consisting of certain organizational responsibilities and activities which cannot very well be ignored. Among others, funds have to be raised for its upkeep and support, physical and intellectual needs of the inmates have to be taken care of, and the many household chores have to be attended to, in addition to its social obligations. The monastery at Baranagore in its initial stage, struggling hard to stand on its feet, had all these problems. As Mahapurush was one of the most senior monks, he was looked up to for suggestion, advice and guidance, and he did his part remarkably well. He considered anything connected with the Order as sacred.

Writes Swami Apurvananda, the Swami's Bengali biographer: "Since the very inception of the Order, Mahapurush showed a unique breadth of vision, being free from narrow ideas of high and low, spiritual and secular. Like a naive child, in a quiet manner, he did everything connected with the math in a spirit of consecrated worship. Such menial household work as cutting vegetables for the kitchen, carrying water from the Ganga, sweeping and dusting the rooms, and even cleansing the lavatories formed parts of his daily routine. And as he went about doing his work one would hear him hum such expressions as Akhanda Satchidananda—Absolute Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. He always maintained a deep spiritual awareness, being attuned to the highest."³

If a monk or devotee was sick, the Swami gladly forwent his meditation and sat by the bedside of the patient, lovingly caring for him until he got well. Sometime during this period, or perhaps a little later, Swami Yogananda, a brother disciple, fell ill with a virulent type of smallpox in Allahabad, a holy place in Uttar Pradesh, at the confluence of the Ganga and the Jamuna. As soon as the news arrived at Baranagore, all became very much concerned. Mahapurush offered his services and accompanied Swami Vivekananda to Allahabad to look after the sick brother. Smallpox is a vicious disease, causing a lot of pain and discomfort to its victim. Mahapurush did everything possible to make Swami Yogananda comfortable, nursing

³ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

him night and day. His nursing had been exceptional in the sense that he identified himself with the ailing person. Even some of the lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna when they were sick were cared for by the Swami. Sometime later when Balaram Bose, a householder devotee, was seriously ill of pneumonia in his Calcutta residence, the Swami hastened to his bedside and looked after him along with others until he passed away. The Swamis Vivekananda and Brahmananda happening to be elsewhere at the time, Mahapurush had to shoulder the responsibility of Balaram's treatment and care.

India is honeycombed, as it were, with holy places, small or large cultural centres, which have grown in importance around certain temples and shrines dedicated to God or God-men. The majority of these holy places are very old, with spiritual associations and traditions which go back as far as many centuries, and they are not difficult to reach. A few others, equally old and sacred, are scattered in parts of India not easily accessible because of the lack of good roads and transportation. Yet pilgrims, young and old, rich and poor, from the four corners of India, visit them, undergoing untold hardships, and the inspiration they draw from these pilgrimages cannot be described in words. Swami Shivananda, like most of his brother disciples, visited a large number of these holy places as an itinerant monk. As information is insufficient, we are not in a position to present a systematic chronological account of this phase of his life, his pilgrimage. We have already men-

tioned the Swami's visit to Bodh Gaya, Vrindavan, Benares and Allahabad—holy places in Uttar Pradesh, Northern India.

In the beginning of 1889, the Swami felt a persistent longing to break away from the math and live the free detached life of an itinerant monk, and he could not resist this impulse any longer. It was at this time that he went on his pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinarayan, two famous holy places in the Himalayas. The mountainous journey, mostly on foot, was long and arduous, but very enjoyable and inspirational. On the way the Swami stopped at the many small and large shrines and temples, doing worship, and occasionally he relieved the tedium of the uphill climb by feasting his eyes on the breathtaking natural scenery. After several days' travel, finally he arrived at Kedar nath, nestled in the very heart of the Himalayas, with eternal snow and glaciers all around, at an altitude of about 12,000 feet above sea level.

Like other pilgrims the Swami visited the temple of Shiva, the great God of the Mountains, and did his worship and meditation. The spiritual atmosphere of the place in a setting all its own moved him profoundly, and he felt the living presence of the Lord. The temple priests officiating at worship were awe-struck by the Swami's luminous, indrawn appearance and assisted him in every way. After staying there for a few days the Swami continued his way down to Badrinarayan, located at a little lower altitude.

About Badrinarayan, Mahapurush wrote to Swami Brahmananda: "It has been four days

since I arrived at Badrinarayan—a beautiful place, situated right on the banks of the river Alakananda, surrounded by snow peaks. Here the Alakananda flows through snow. In certain spots the river is so wholly covered with snow that the water is not visible at all. While coming to Badrinarayan I had to walk over snow part of the way, sometimes as long a distance as half a mile. And yet this place does not seem to be so dreadfully cold as Kedarnath.”⁴ At Badrinarayan also the Swami stayed for a few days and visited the temple of the Lord Badrinarayan (Vishnu), enjoying his worship and meditation.

Filled with memories of spiritual exaltation the Swami then moved down to Almora, a Himalayan town, where he spent a few months resting and recuperating. During his sojourn in Almora the Swami met several sincere seekers of Truth and talked with them about God and the message of his Master. Impressed by his saintly personality some of them became his ardent admirers and followers. We may mention here the name of Lala Badrishah Thulghoria, a well-to-do highly respected merchant of the locality. Lalaji literally adored the Swami and welcomed him in his home. So long as the Swami was there he availed himself of every opportunity to associate with him and serve him. Having no male issue, Badrishah was very unhappy, thinking that with his death there would be a total break in the family line. Like a simple child one day he approached Mahapurush and bared his

⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

heart, imploring him to bless him so that he would have a son. Touched by the man's earnest appeal the Swami prayed to the Lord. Strange as it may seem, in due course a son was born to Badrishah's wife, and they named him Siddhadas—Servant of the Saint, in grateful memory of the Swami's blessing and prayer.

Towards the end of 1889, the Swami returned to the monastery at Baranagore, and his brothers were all very happy to have him back. As the Swamis Vivekananda and Brahmananda, who had been at the helm, happened to be away from the monastery at the time, Mahapurush had to take the responsibility of its management. For about two years he stayed quietly at the math, looking after his brothers. Swami Akhandananda had always shown a great passion for the freedom and adventure of an itinerant monk and had been travelling for a number of years in different parts of the Himalayas and Tibet. While in Tibet he got into some difficulties and was detained by the Tibetan government on false suspicion. He was released shortly afterwards, when they had found out that he was absolutely innocent. Besides, in Tibet constant movement under uncertain conditions undermined his health. Naturally, Mahapurush and the brothers at Baranagore became much concerned for Swami Akhandananda. Mahapurush wrote to him, urging him to return to the monastery as soon as possible. We quote from Mahapurushji's letter, which gives information regarding the math and the different monks at the time: "We came to know all about you from your

letter received this morning. We are very sorry to learn that you are detained. However, luckily you are in the British territory and it will help matters. We shall write at once to the British Agent and the Governor to expedite your release. Please don't worry. Nowadays most of our brothers are sojourning in Northern India. Naren, Rakhal and Khoka (Swami Subodhananda) are in Benares. Yogin and Niranjan are in Allahabad. Sarat, Kali, Hari and Sanyal are practising austerity in Hrishikesh. Baburam, Shashi, Sarada, Latu, Gopalda and myself are now at the math. All of us are doing well here, and we know from letters received that those who are away are also in good health. The worship and service of our Lord is going on nicely as usual. How long will you live this kind of itinerant life? Our joys would know no bounds if you came down and joined us here, deciding to live a settled life for a while. Brahman is immutable—unchangeable like Mount Sumeru. You are a true monk, and as such you yourself are Brahman in reality. That's why I am saying all this to you."⁵

Of all the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Trigunatitananda had always been well known for his strong physique, determination, power of endurance and dispassion. In his eagerness to realise God in various ways, he practised fasts, vigils and similar disciplines without any regard for his health, and he followed a pattern of life peculiarly his own. At one time he took the

⁵ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

vow of shutting himself up in his room at Baranagore and practising japa—the repetition of the Lord's name—for hours at a stretch every day, and he did this without any thought of sleep, food and rest. His brothers, of course, saw to it that he did not go without food. One evening—it was quite late—all had had their meals except the Swami. He was determined not to leave his meditation seat until he had completed a certain number of counts of his rosary—a large number. Finally, after much persuasion he agreed to come to the dining room and eat on the one condition that Mahapurush would touch his body while he was having his meal. He sincerely believed that the holy touch of a great soul like Swami Shivananda would offset the breach of the vow that he had taken. Mahapurush, of course, was glad to do as he was asked. This incident not only brings out Swami Trigunatitananda's firmness of purpose in his spiritual strivings, it also demonstrates the deep love and regard that he bore to Mahapurush.

The above-mentioned two years that Mahapurush spent with his brothers at Baranagore were very fruitful and significant from a spiritual standpoint, although they lacked the joyous freedom and detachment of his itinerant days. While lovingly performing the many duties and services in connection with the monastery and helping towards the stabilization of the Order, he always lived in an exalted, blissful state of consciousness. In a letter written to a close friend he indicates this: "Through the grace of our Master my mind continues to be in an excellent condition. I wish

I could share this with you. May you find peace and rest in His eternal abode, where there is no disease, fear and evil,—this is my prayer!” By the end of 1891, Mahapurush felt again the lure of the itinerant life and of pilgrimage. He mentions this in a letter: “One day while in deep meditation I felt a strong urge to visit Rameswar, so much so that if I had had the wings of a bird I would have flown there right away. The Lord is now attracting me in that particular form. Infinite are His manifestations! When the Lord of the Universe calls, it is irresistible!” So one day the Swami left the monastery at Baranagore and was on his way to holy places in different parts of India. For some reason or other, he had to postpone his visit to Rameswar at that time. From Allahabad he writes to a brother: “Omkarnath on the Narmada, Mahakal in Ujjain and Tryambakeswar on the Godavari—they are attracting me very strongly; they are all manifestations of the Lord. It is perhaps the wish of the Master that I visit them, otherwise why should I have such a strong longing?” The places mentioned here, and several others in Central and Western India the Swami visited one after another at that time, staying in each place for a few days.

Of all places the Swami preferred Panchavati on the Godavari, a place associated with Rama and Sita, the much-worshipped hero and heroine of the Sanskrit epic Ramayana. To the Hindu mind Rama and Sita represent not only the ideal man and woman in their various relationships, they are incarnations of God, commanding divine homage

and worship. Panchavati and the neighbouring area, that were in the olden days deeply wooded forest tracts abounding in wild animals, have since changed into flourishing villages and towns, adorned with many temples all along the river Godavari. At Panchavati the Swami was filled with the spirit of Rama-Sita and had unusual spiritual experiences. He was enjoying his stay there very much, when for some unavoidable reasons he had to go to Bombay—a crowded city with its characteristic noise and distraction. Naturally, a city like Bombay could not appeal to the Swami, and he remained there for only a very short time, moving next to Poona. In this city he visited the ancient Shiva temple of Someswar, staying there for quite a while. The temple priest, impressed by the Swami's saintly personality, arranged for his board and lodging and helped him in every way, while the latter practised austerity to his heart's content. From Poona the Swami returned to Panchavati and spent another fruitful and enjoyable period which lasted for several months. At dusk, the time for vespers, when the many temples and shrines on the Godavari were resounding with gongs and the ringing of bells, and numberless devotees were chanting hymns and prayers, the Swami would be lost in the ecstasies of meditation, feeling the vivid presence of the Lord in His form of Rama-Sita. There is no doubt that he had a happy time at Panchavati, but the strain and hardship told upon his health. So he had to move to Allahabad for rest and recuperation. It was not long before he started

again on his usual rigid routine at Jhunsi, a secluded spot near Allahabad at the confluence of the two sacred rivers. Here is an account of the Swami's life at that time: "In those days Mahapurush used to move about barefoot, with no earthly possessions other than two pieces of loin cloth and a blanket. His food consisted of a few pieces of unleavened bread and a little lentil soup which he obtained from a chhatra that used to feed monks. Most of the time he remained absorbed in his spiritual practices without stirring from his cabin. Swami Abhedananda was also there similarly engaged, and the brothers vied with each other in their austerities. At that time Mahapurushji's form used to shine like a flame, radiating a marvellous spiritual glow,"⁶

In the beginning of 1892, the monastery at Baranagore was transferred to better and more commodious quarters at Alambazar, a place not far from Calcutta, in the neighbourhood of Dakshineswar. When the news of the transfer came, the Swami hastened to Alambazar to do his part in organizing the new household. This was shortly before the birthday anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. Since the Cossipore days, the monastic and lay disciples of the Master had been in the habit of celebrating his birthday appropriately by worship, meditation, devotional singing and feasting, and with the passing of years the celebration grew in importance and was attended by larger and larger crowds. That year, for certain

⁶ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

reasons, the celebration took place in the temple-garden at Dakshineswar, where the Master had spent the major part of his life, and the function proved a great success. Concerning it the Swami wrote to a brother: "The birthday anniversary of our Master was performed agreeably, in due solemnity. As many as 1,500 men and women from Calcutta came and enthusiastically participated in the programme. Five or six musical groups were there, one of which gave a splendid recital of the Master's divine life, much to the edification of the assembled congregation. People in groups visited the Master's simple little room as well as other spots associated with his spiritual practices and realizations. They expressed their inner joy and reverence by singing devotional songs and making prostrations at each place. It is indeed an act of divine grace that so many people are being attracted and are becoming devotees."⁷

Soon after this birthday, the Swami felt a deep longing to visit Kamarpukur, the Master's birth-place in West Bengal. Full of great anticipation he made the trip accompanied by his brother, Swami Ramakrishnananda. After arriving at Kamarpukur and setting foot in Sri Ramakrishna's paternal home, Mahapurush was overwhelmed with spiritual emotion and fervour. He prostrated himself in the courtyard, rolling again and again in the sacred dust. The very sky, air, plants and shrubs, birds and beasts, people and everything at Kamar-

⁷ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

pukur have profound spiritual associations. In the estimation of the Swami no place could be more sacred than Kamarpukur; it aroused in his mind a host of sweet, precious memories. The simple mud hut where the Master had first seen the light of day, the family shrine of Raghuvir where he and his parents had worshipped, and the pond where he used to bathe and swim are still there. The old Shiva temple, the distant lake of Haldarpukur, the Bhutirkhal, a canal flowing in the outskirts of the village, the cremation ground that used to be the Master's midnight haunt, where he became lost in spiritual practices, and the spacious mango grove where he was wont to play, sing and stage religious dramas with his childhood friends—all are still there; only Sri Ramakrishna is no longer there in the flesh. This thought was painful at first, but it was not long before the Swami felt the Master's living presence within as well as without, everywhere, and he was filled with a great peace. At Kamarpukur the two brothers stayed for over a month, indulging in reminiscence, discussing spiritual matters, visiting places of interest, and meditating; altogether they had a delightful time. At Kamarpukur Mahapurush suffered from attacks of a bad malarial fever, but these sick spells did not mar his inner joy. As soon as he had partially recovered from this ailment, he returned with Swami Ramakrishnananda to Alambazar.

After spending some time quietly with his brother disciples at the math, the Swami was off again as an itinerant monk; this was at the end of 1892. He now visited Kurukshetra, Jwalamukhi,

Saroe and other holy places in Northern India and Rajasthan. Kurukshetra, the vast area around New Delhi, the present capital of India, is the place where was once fought the bloody internecine war mentioned in the Mahabharata and where the glorious message of the Bhagavad Gita was delivered. As the Swami traversed the spot he must have been reminded of Sri Krishna, the Lord and teacher of the Gita, and have been filled with great spiritual fervour. From Kurukshetra he went on to Jwalamukhi, Saroe and other sacred spots, practising austerities, carrying no possessions, solely dependent upon God.

Then in leisurely fashion the Swami went on to Almora in the Himalayas, where he stayed for several months. Many times since then he went to Almora and the neighbouring region. He always seemed to be particularly fond of these parts of the Himalayas because of their bracing climate and superb scenic grandeur, as well as their seclusion. He enjoyed his stay there, using his time to the best advantage. In a letter written from Almora the Swami thus describes his mental condition during one of these visits: "I am in excellent spirits at present, the greater part of my time being spent in deep thinking and meditation. Sometimes I read a little, but it does not amount to anything. The reason is that while reading I become so absorbed in a particular verse or passage that I do not feel like reading further. And as I continue to dwell on the idea set forth in that verse or passage, my mind becomes extremely calm and there is the feeling of ineffable bliss. I have passed the stage where one

ordinarily finds joy in looking at a quiet forest or landscape.”⁸ Again he writes, “The pure joy that one feels in the course of deep meditation leaves its intoxicating effect lasting for twenty-four hours, and its continuous thread is never broken, whatever activity one may be engaged in.”⁹ While in Almora, the Swami met Mr. E. R. Sturdy, an Englishman who had come to India with the idea of studying as well as of practising Indian mystic wisdom and yoga. It so happened that the Swami occupied a cottage close to the place where Mr. Sturdy was staying, and their visits deepened into genuine friendship. They met frequently and discussed spiritual problems for hours at a stretch. Mr. Sturdy became so charmed with the Swami’s magnetic personality that subsequently after his return to England he was of great help to Swami Vivekananda in his work of preaching there. After spending some time in Almora the Swami felt like moving down to the plains, bound for his most cherished holy place—Rameswar in South India. On the way he stopped at Agra, Vrindavan, Jaipur, Abu and Bombay, finally arriving in South India.

In the city of Madras the Swami paused for a while, and during his sojourn there he had occasion to meet many sincere and earnest people, especially young men who were deeply interested in India’s cultural heritage and her message to the West as enunciated by Swami Vivekananda. They were fascinated by Mahapurushji’s radiant personality—his spirit of renunciation and understanding of

^{8, 9} *Mahapurush Shivananda*

spiritual truths. They often came and sat at his feet to hear his words about God. Mahapurush was delighted beyond words to read some of the inspiring letters that Swami Vivekananda had written to those young men regarding his glorious success in America and his future plans for India. From Madras the Swami moved to Chidambaram and Madura, visiting temples in each of these places, finally arriving at Rameswar towards the end of 1893. Here he stayed for a number of days worshipping, praying and meditating at the famous ancient temple. There is no doubt that the Swami felt the vivid presence of Shiva and was deeply affected by the intense spiritual atmosphere of the shrine. From Rameswar he journeyed on to Srirangam, where he visited the temple of Lord called Ranganatha.

After finishing his pilgrimage in South India and incidentally preaching to many Sri Ramakrishna's message of harmony and renunciation, Mahapurush at last returned to the monastery at Alambazar. By this time the monastery was better organized, with a fairly large number of recruits as prospective monks, eager to live the life of renunciation and consecrated service. Swami Vivekananda's phenomenal success at the Parliament of Religions held at Chicago in connection with the World Fair, together with his subsequent lecture tours and warm reception in different cities of the United States, had their repercussions all over India, raising the country to a pinnacle of glory unprecedented in her history. Naturally, Mahapurush and his brothers of the monastery at Alambazar

were delighted beyond measure and eagerly awaited fresh news about Swamiji's work in the West.

It was in June or July of 1894 that Mahapurush went out again, this time on a pilgrimage to the Himalayan retreat at Uttarkashi in Northern India. En route he broke his journey at Benares and Lucknow. At the latter place he unexpectedly met two of his brother disciples, the Swamis Brahmananda and Turiyananda, who had been away from the math for some time. Very happy to see each other, they discussed spiritual matters, although the visit was very short. For about a fortnight Mahapurush stopped at Mussouri, a Himalayan city of a fairly large size; then he took the road again leading to Uttarkashi, a road that passed through dense virgin forests, abounding in ferocious wild animals. Dauntless and unafraid he journeyed along on foot, enjoying the natural scenery and living upon chance morsels, until finally he arrived at his destination. Uttarkashi is a small valley of unusual beauty, protected and sheltered by steep snow-capped Himalayan ranges and encircled by the river Ganga on three sides. Placed in a superb setting right in the heart of the mountain, away from the noise, bustle and distraction of human society, Uttarkashi has always been considered an ideal retreat for monks and ascetics. In those days very few could go to Uttarkashi because of its inaccessibility. The Swami was charmed by the spiritual atmosphere of the place—an atmosphere built up through centuries. With its many temples and shrines dedicated to the deities Shiva, Annapurna and others, Uttarkashi, as its name implies, is Northern Benares, as

holy as the Benares of the plains. For sleeping quarters the Swami found a pleasant little cabin on the Ganga, where he spent very happily the four-month period of the rainy season, called in Indian monastic parlance "chaturmasya". It was a rugged life, though very profitable spiritually. Later the Swami journeyed back to Alambazar.

During the next two years Mahapurush remained at the math, living the usual life, only occasionally making short trips here and there. At this time he must have visited Bithur, Brahmavarta and other such holy places in Northern India, the details of those trips remaining mostly unknown. Once in a communicative mood the Swami told the monks at Belur about some of his experiences in connection with such a trip, stating in general:

"This body did a lot of mountain climbing, visited many places and practised much austerity. There were times when I did not have more than one piece of cloth with me. Many nights I slept under a tree. I had a feeling of great dispassion and never thought about physical comforts, finding joy in austerity alone. I wandered a great deal, carrying no possessions, but was never in any trouble. The Master stayed by me and protected me from all dangers and difficulties, and I never went hungry. In those days I felt great restlessness and longing to realize God. While walking I would practise the remembrance of God and pray to Him earnestly. I disliked the company of people and avoided roads ordinarily frequented by travellers. Towards evening I found shelter somewhere and spent the night absorbed in my own thoughts. If a person lives this way, having no possessions, he develops full resignation to God. He becomes established in the idea

that God alone is his protector in prosperity as well as in adversity."¹⁰

From what the Swami said one gets a true insight into the kind of life he lived at this time. With this rather brief account of Swami's austerities and pilgrimages, we close this chapter,—an interesting chapter capable of furnishing food to many a seeker of God. We have seen how for over a decade the Swami travelled in different parts of India, sometimes in the Himalayas, sometimes on the plains, and sometimes in deserts or forests, and always he lived a life worthy of a man of God. We have mentioned in a previous chapter that Mahapurush had experienced samadhi three times as a young man during the lifetime of the Master. The austerities and meditations of his itinerant period established him in that blessed state, enriching his life and giving him the necessary depth and strength to shoulder the responsibilities of the great task ahead of him. On the anvil of those years and the one in which he began doing works of service was forged the character and personality later adored as Mahapurush, the Head of the Order, who constantly lived in God and overflowed with love and blessings to all.

¹⁰ *Shivananda Vani*, II

CHAPTER IV

LAUNCHING INTO ACTS OF SERVICE

IT has been mentioned that Sri Ramakrishna embodied the purest love on earth, which found eloquent expression in his daily life. This love he instilled into the hearts of his disciples, uniting them and cementing the foundation of the monastic Order which bears his name. The Master thought very highly of Swami Vivekânanda, his foremost disciple, and entrusted him with the great responsibility of taking care of his other young disciples. Swamiji deserved all this confidence for he possessed in full measure all the qualities of a born spiritual leader—vision, intelligence, practicality, and above everything else love, by means of which he held together his brother disciples. Swami Shivananda and the others adored Swamiji and looked up to him for inspiration and guidance. Although for a number of years immediately following the Master's death most of his disciples, including Mahapurush and Swamiji, got scattered as wandering monks, practising austerity and meditation by themselves, they could not very well live like that for long. The tie of love that bound them to one another and to Sri Ramakrishna was indissoluble, and it finally brought them together for the good of the world. The following reminiscence of Mahapurush brings this out:

“Once a certain brahmachari, H of Benares, and myself were out on a pilgrimage, desirous

of visiting the different holy places of Northern India. On our way to Vrindavan, as we stopped in Hathras we learned that Swamiji was stopping there with a railway official and suffering from an attack of fever. We went to see him and his joy knew no bounds when he met us so unexpectedly. In spite of his sickness, how he laughed, indulging in fun and joke! We stayed there for two or three days. Swamiji's temperature came down and he got well, although he remained very weak. He asked us to go on our way, visit Vrindavan and then come back. He said that he might accompany us to Hrishikesh.

"H and I went to Vrindavan where we stayed for a few days, enjoying our visit very much. Vrindavan is a great place associated with the sacred memories of Sri Krishna and his divine life. It certainly has a unique spiritual atmosphere. From Vrindavan we went to Shyamkunda and Radhakunda. On the way, as H was out washing, some one stole his little bundle. As a rule, I used to carry the small money that the two of us had but H had put away one ten-rupee note in his bundle. Naturally, H was quite disturbed when this was stolen. Swamiji had a good laugh over the incident when he heard of it. He had a relapse of his fever with high temperature, and this protracted illness rendered him very weak and thin. It was decided that instead of leaving him there we would take him down to Calcutta, to which he agreed. Arrangements were made and word was sent to the math accordingly. In Hathras all the railway officials as well as many distinguished people became ardent admirers of Swamiji. Wherever he went Swamiji made a great impression upon people. Whoever talked with him once became charmed by his magnetic personality. These admirers and devotees of Hathras would not at first let Swamiji go, but finally they yielded.

“As H had his heart set on going to Hrishikesh with me, he showed great displeasure when his plan was upset. He felt very bad that I should not be able to accompany him. Before parting he argued and said : ‘You are a sadhu. Why this attachment? It is not at all imperative to accompany Swami Vivekananda. A monk should not be attached like this!’ In reply I tried to explain and said : ‘What you say is true. We are monks and should be above attachment ; but we still have a little of this attachment for our brother disciples and will have it yet. This is due to the teaching of our Master, who wanted us, his disciples, to cherish this love for one another. Besides, Swamiji is our leader—our crest-jewel. We should not hesitate to lay down our lives for his sake. We would consider ourselves blessed if we could serve him even at the cost of our own life. How could you understand how precious Swamiji is?’ He kept silent for a while. We arranged for his trip to Hrishikesh and he went on his way by himself. Swamiji on his arrival at the math got the best of care and treatment and soon recovered.

“After a few months Swamiji went out again as an itinerant monk with some of his brother disciples, and after visiting many places he finally arrived in Hrishikesh. There, day and night he spent in meditation, austerity, study and discussion with his brother disciples. Swamiji would often remark that such joy he had never experienced before. It being the rainy season, very few of the sadhus were there at the time. For food they had to depend on chhatras—community kitchens founded by well-to-do people for feeding holy men. In those days Hrishikesh, because of its seclusion, beautiful location and spiritual association, was an ideal place for spiritual practice. Now it has, of course, grown into a

little town. It does not possess any more of the seclusion that it used to have in the olden times.

“After spending some time happily there in austerity and study, Swamiji again fell ill with a fever. The Swamis Turiyananda, Saradananda and a few others were with him. His temperature rose. As no doctor was available in that locality, they all became very much concerned. One day it so happened that Swamiji’s temperature suddenly fell after a steady increase, leaving his whole body as cold as ice. Only his forehead was slightly warm ; there was no pulse. As he stopped speaking altogether, they all despaired of his life. Being at a loss what to do, they prayed fervently to God, saying : ‘ O Lord, save us from this trial! Cure Naren. If Thou wilt indeed take him, do not leave us behind ; take us too.’ They were in great distress and there was not much that they could do under the circumstances.

“It so happened that one of the brother disciples while bathing in the Ganga met a sadhu, a venerable man who hailed from that part of the country and used to live there all the time. He asked the disciple why he looked so sad. When Swamiji’s condition was described the holy man readily came and after examining him said : ‘ Don’t worry. I am prescribing a medicine. Administer this, mixing it with a little honey and powdered pepper. He will recover in no time.’ Strange as it may seem, as soon as the medicine had been given, Swamiji’s body started to become warm again and very soon he felt much better. Later, when he heard the story of his miraculous recovery Swamiji said calmly : ‘ Why did you give me that medicine? I was in such a blessed state!’ Gradually he got well.”¹

¹ *Shivananda Vani*, II.

We shall see here and henceforward that Swami Shivananda and his brother disciples were not destined to spend their entire life in austerity and pilgrimage, seeking and enjoying the bliss of illumination by themselves. Later, as the head of the Order, the Swami mentions this to the monks at Belur: "In those days we practised austerity and meditation to our heart's content. Now the Master has called us to do his work. It has been necessary for the propagation of his ideas. That is why even now he is making us do a little of his work in our old age. We thought at first that we should spend our lives in exclusive austerity and meditation, and as a matter of fact we did so to a certain extent, but the Master willed otherwise. Don't you see how hard Swamiji worked? How many times did he visit the Himalayas with the idea of losing himself in austerity and meditation! Some one, however, dragged him down."²

By the express wish of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda brought his brothers together and founded the monastic Order, which had for its motto "salvation and the good of the world." It was Swamiji who initiated the programme of service and glorified it by interpreting it as an act of worship—the service of man, God's living image, being synonymous with His worship.

After his triumphal emergence at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, Swamiji toured America and England, lecturing on Vedanta to many enthusiastic audiences. While organizing permanent centres for teaching Vedanta in the

² *Shivananda Vani*, I

West, he constantly had in mind India and her down-trodden masses. He wrote regularly to his brother disciples, giving them definite plans for the organization of the Order with special reference to its Indian work, that of regenerating India. This led eventually to the founding of the Ramakrishna Mission, an organization established in connection with the Order to carry out various works of service over the whole world. From America Swamiji wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda at the monastery at Alambazar, and in this letter he urged that the monastic and lay disciples of the Master should unite and apply themselves to the immense work facing them in India.

Swami Shivananda, who happened to be at Alambazar, was at that time not quite ready for the programme of service; he was so deeply absorbed in ascetic moods. Later he said, "I never dreamt before then that I should have to work. But when Swamiji's letter came I began to think, 'Yes, I shall have to do something.' " A man of God, enjoying the peace and blessedness of the transcendental realm, naturally finds it difficult to become interested in the affairs of this evanescent, relative world, no matter how noble the cause. We can therefore imagine that orienting himself to a life of action meant considerable struggle to Swami Shivananda. With the passing of days he recognized the deeper, spiritual implications of work. Gradually his desire to work increased, and at last, buying himself an English dictionary and other necessary books, he resumed his studies, for he wanted to prepare himself more adequately.

Shortly afterward, Swami Shivananda himself received a letter from Swami Vivekananda in America. In it Swamiji said: "I have no time even to eat or sleep. I have to do the work of a hundred men. Power is unfolding. Brother, collect some maps, globes, magic lanterns, etc., and go to every village in India. Start the work of teaching the poor to read and write. The country is looking towards us; we have no time now to sit idle." In this letter Swamiji also asked Swami Shivananda to locate the Swamis Brahmananda and Turiyananda, who had been leading the life of wandering monks, and to persuade them to return to the monastery.

After four years of successful preaching abroad, Swami Vivekananda returned to India in 1897. Swami Shivananda and another brother disciple travelled all the way from Bengal to South India to welcome Swamiji and accompanied him to the monastery at Alambazar. About this trip Mahapurush stated later:

"To receive Swamiji some monks of our Order including myself were at the Madura station. Alighting from the royal carriage lent by the Rajah of Ramnad, Swamiji greeted us by embracing us warmly. . . . All of us were lodged at the state guest house. In the afternoon the leading citizens of the city gathered at the Madura College and presented Swamiji with an address of welcome, to which he gave a reply. That was the first time I heard him speak in public and I was certainly struck by his gift of speech. Hitherto we had lived and travelled together, but never had I seen him manifest such dynamic eloquence. He had a wonderful command over

the English language, and when he spoke he gave one the impression that he was speaking in his own mother-tongue.... In Madras Swamiji stayed for more than a week and gave as many public lectures. Then, accompanied by a few disciples of Madras, Swamiji boarded a steamer bound for Calcutta. His Western disciples and we his brothers were also in the party. On board the steamer Swamiji had animated religious discussions with some Christian missionary passengers, who learned a great deal from him. The deck of the steamer became, as it were, an auditorium, attracting the entire passenger community..... Finally, Swamiji arrived in Calcutta, where he was given a tremendous public ovation. In Calcutta he gave two or three public lectures. After a long time we were again together at the math with Swamiji. Words fail to describe the joy we had in his company in those days."³

Amid festivities and rejoicings, plans for the expansion and consolidation of the Order were discussed, and Swami Shivananda most gladly offered his services. At Swamiji's request, Swami Shivananda went to Ceylon and started the work of disseminating Vedanta there. He conducted classes on the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Raja yoga*, which were attended by considerable numbers of educated Hindus and Europeans. One of the students, Mrs. Pickett, who was given the Sanskrit name of Hari-priya or Beloved of the Lord, was specially trained by the Swami to teach, and at his direction subsequently went to Australia and New Zealand, where she interested many people in Vedanta. After he

³ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

had done seven or eight months' good work in Ceylon and established the Vivekananda Society of Colombo, Swami Shivananda felt that his presence was no longer needed there, and he returned to the headquarters of the Order.

About his visit to Ceylon and work there the Swami said later: "Yes, I did go to Ceylon. Swamiji, shortly after his return from the West, sent me to Ceylon to preach Vedanta. I stayed in Colombo for about seven or eight months. Several of us used to live together. I conducted a class on the Bhagavad Gita and discoursed on spiritual topics regularly. Many used to attend the class. I was in excellent spirits. During my stay in Ceylon I visited the various famous temples that are there. I visited the Tooth Temple, which enshrines one of the teeth of Lord Buddha. What a structure! Certainly an awe-inspiring temple!" To a monk who then asked if he liked Ceylon, the Swami replied: "I am happy everywhere. I never feel discontented in any place. If one can live in God, one can be happy anywhere. Yes, I did like Ceylon and South India."

After his return from the West Swami Vivekananda had a very busy time, interviewing people, giving public lectures in different cities of India, as well as organizing the activities of the Order. By the middle of 1898 he was able to purchase a plot of land with buildings in the village of Belur, on the western side of the Ganga, a place just across the river from the temple garden of Dakshineswar, and there in January of the following year the monastery was permanently transferred. Swamiji

felt very much relieved, thinking that at last he was able to give concrete shape to the sacred trust bequeathed to him by the Master. While living at the monastery Swamiji gave added impetus to the inner life of the monks by his inspiring presence, guidance and talks. Mahapurush was glad to be back from Ceylon and tried his best to help Swamiji in many ways. In addition to intensive spiritual practice and works of service, study and discussion were emphasized as important items in the daily life of the monks. Study classes were held at stated hours in which Sanskrit scriptural texts or similar literature of a philosophical and mystical type were read and explained. One qualified would do the reading and explaining, the rest would listen. Sometimes instead of reading there would be questions and answers, leading to discussions covering philosophical and spiritual problems of a wide variety. Like all others, Mahapurush attended these meetings and took part in them with lively enthusiasm. In the old diary of the monastery there are interesting records of these discussions. We quote here the substance of some of these in which Mahapurush answered the questions:⁴

March, 14, 1898

Question: Why does truth suffer persecution so often at the hands of opponents? Let us take, for instance, the case of the martyrs of religion. So many had to pay so heavily for their spiritual convictions, sometimes even losing their lives.

Answer: Truth can never suffer, for it is transcendental, not physical. We see the body to suffer, not the

⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

real man. Persecution, instead of hurting the truth, always brings out its pristine glory all the more.

Question: How can we reconcile the relentless law of karma ruling man's destiny and the idea of an omnipotent, beneficent God?

Answer: Yes, they appear irreconcilable if we take them literally, as two compact aspects of the same theory. Strictly speaking, those who take karma in the cold, calculating spirit cannot accept the idea of a Divine Providence, all-powerful and all-merciful, and *vice versa*. In the divine scheme, governed by love and compassion, pain and pleasure come to us for our own good in accordance with the divine will, irrespective of the law of karma—that is what some think. They do not take karma so seriously.⁵

March 17, 1898

Question: How can implicit obedience and individual initiative and freedom go together?

Answer: The greatest freedom lies in implicit obedience. One attains this freedom by obeying the commands of one's elder without questioning.

March 30, 1898

Question: What would be the condition of this world if every individual man were truly spiritual?

⁵ According to the law of karma, actions, good and bad, produce corresponding results and are followed by pleasures and pains; they create bondage unless performed in a spirit of dedication or detachment. Dedicated or detached actions are no actions at all because there is no sense of agency with expectation of fruits, and as such they cannot bind. People who have learned detachment, dedicating the fruits of their actions to the Lord, are not therefore afraid of the law of karma. In so far as pleasures and pains are concerned, such people take them philosophically as factors necessary for the purification of their souls. They are at peace, having their faith in Divine Providence characterized by love and compassion.

Answer: Prima facie, such a question is absurd and illogical, for evil as it is cannot altogether disappear from this world. It will ever remain a concomitant part of good.

April 9, 1898

Question: What is the place of monks in our society?

Answer: Among the various forces operating in nature two are most prominent and potent: One evolves forms around us on the relative plane, the other does the opposite—destroys them, leading to involution and final unity. This process of evolution and involution is only another form of the twin forces of attraction or attachment and repulsion or dispassion. It is because of attraction or attachment that souls are drawn to this world, coming back and forth and playing their different embodied roles. As monks aim at freeing themselves from attachment, they represent the other force, namely, that of dispassion or repulsion.

Again, contraction is death, expansion is life. This expansion is only a manifestation of dispassion or repulsion. Fullest expansion, the goal of all sentient beings, is the attainment of a state of absolute existence, knowledge and bliss. Monks serve a very important purpose in the economy of nature by helping men in the unfolding and controlling of their minds and by leading them to that blessed state. From time immemorial up to this day it has been the monks who have been the dynamic, world-shaking leaders of men in the domain of religion, sociology, philosophy and science.

Questions: By what external signs can we recognize a true monk?

Answer: By his conduct. A true monk is absolutely pure, compassionate and fearless.

Question: Can a man be called a true monk if he is afraid of this world?

Answer: No. Fearlessness is one of the essential virtues that characterize a true monk. He who is subject to fear has not yet become a full-fledged monk; he has just started on the path.

Question: Can a family man be a monk?

Answer: Yes. We can cite, for example, the sage Janaka and other Kshatriya monarchs of the Upanishadic age.

Question: Can a woman take the vow of monasticism?

Answer: Yes. Everyone can take the monastic vow; there is no sex in the Self.

April 14, 1898

Question: Why does a spiritual aspirant sometimes overstep the bounds of certain essential and universally recognized moral codes before he has the knowledge of Brahman? As *rajas* and *tamas* are unnecessary and detrimental to such knowledge they are discarded in preference to *sattva*. But sometimes we see even illumined souls losing temper or becoming subject to similar weaknesses born of *rajas*. For example, hot-tempered Durvasa and such other sages. How to explain this?

Answer: Every man is born subject to the three forces of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. But in every case there is the predominance of one over the other two, some having more of *sattva*, others more of *rajas*, and so on. It is only after the attainment of liberation, which is beyond these three forces, that a person becomes their master. In this blessed state, while living his life in the world and playing the role of a spiritual teacher, such a person, if necessary, may choose to manifest one of these forces for his work in accordance with his mood and the circumstances around him. But usually we see an illumined teacher or leader of men expressing more of *sattva* and *rajas* than of *tamas*. Some liberated souls

may propose to live a quiet meditative life in a secluded spot away from the haunts of men, helping those that come to them for advice and guidance. Others may go out as preachers travelling all over the world, broadcasting their messages to all. Sometimes, if necessary, these teachers may remonstrate with those who are evil-minded and chastise them in a seemingly angry mood, but this anger is only a pretence. Even as a father loves his son, so do these teachers their followers, and whenever the latter are taken to task, it is for their own good; it proves to be supremely beneficial in the end.

April 15, 1898

Question: How can it be proved that this world is unreal and Brahman alone is real?

Answer: If we observe closely the changeableness of things outside as well as within, we can be convinced of the unreality of the entire world. Every change perceived by the senses as happening outside has its counterpart within us. In proportion as the outer world is changeable, so is the inner world. By the reality of a thing is meant truly its existence at all times, eternally. Unfortunately, in this world of phenomena there is nothing that remains unchanged for a second. Now with the idea of finding the ultimate truth, if we push our analysis further, we shall see that back of the changeable phenomena is the immutable Brahman. First, gross objects, then subtle and subtler objects—whatever we analyse in the outer world—we fail to find any permanence in them. Baffled we finally turn within ourselves. This self-withdrawal or abstraction is the only way to the knowledge of Brahman or the Supreme Reality.

In March, 1899, Swami Yogananda, one of the foremost monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, passed away. He had always been of a delicate constitution, and the austerities he had been practising at this time told upon his health. As a result

he fell ill and suffered from various ailments until he died at the youthful age of thirty-eight. Amongst Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples Swami Yogananda was the first to die. All at the monastery, including Mahapurush, felt grieved. Mahapurush was present by his bedside, caring for him till he breathed his last, and asked: "Yogin, are you thinking of the Lord?" In reply Swami Yogananda said, in a voice clear and unfaltering: "Yes, I am. He is more and more in my heart." We know from reliable authority that the Swami was in an exalted state, having some unusual spiritual experiences before he left this world. The Master considered Swami Yogananda as one of those few blessed, ever-perfect souls whom he styled "Nitya-siddha Iswara-kotis," born to help him in his divine mission. The Swami devotedly served the Holy Mother for a number of years and was very dear to her. His loss was irreparable to the Order, and after his death Swami Vivekananda remarked: "The first brick of the edifice is just shaken loose. This is the beginning of the end."

In 1899 an epidemic of bubonic plague broke out in the city of Calcutta and the outlying districts. The toll of death was high and there was a great panic. Swami Vivekananda felt much concerned, but he himself was ill at the time; so he deputed Swami Shivananda and Sister Nevedita, one of Swamiji's Western disciples, to organize works of service for the alleviation of suffering. Without any consideration for personal safety, Swami Shivananda and his co-workers launched the relief programme. They segregated the sick, cared for people

in distress, and performed other clinical and sanitary works.

Several times during this period, at the request of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Shivananda went forth to collect funds for various purposes. In 1899 an immense landslide caused considerable damage to property in a certain section of Darjeeling in the Himalayas. Swami Shivananda raised money to help the people affected. Again in 1901 the headquarters of the Order needed money for its support and improvement; Swami Shivananda did his part to collect the necessary funds.

It is remarkable how Swami Shivananda placed his luminous God-conscious mind and capabilities at the disposal of his brother Swami Vivekananda and gladly engaged in various activities at the latter's behest. The other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, all spiritual giants, evinced the same willingness to follow Swamiji's lead and co-operated in every way in the activities of the Order. This indicated their towering stature and the depth of their love for their brother Swami Vivekananda as well as their immense faith in his leadership. Such unquestioning loyalty of the disciples of a world teacher to one of their number is unique in religious history.

Pre-eminently an ascetic by nature, Swami Shivananda felt at this time an urge to go back to the Himalayas and lose himself in contemplation and meditation. Swamiji hesitantly gave his consent, but while bidding Mahapurush farewell he embraced him and asked that he established a monastery in the Himalayas, if he could find a suit-

able place. For some time Swami Shivananda travelled in different parts of the Himalayas, living the life of his preference. Although for various reasons it was not possible to carry out Swamiji's wish during this period, eventually, in 1915, Swami Shivananda was to succeed in founding a monastery in Almora, and the unfinished work of the monastery would, later still, be completed by Swami Turiyananda.

Swami Yogananda's death, the tremendous responsibility of building up the Order, the carrying on of the programme of service, and excessive physical and mental strain undermined Swami Vivekananda's health; his iron physique seemed to have been shattered. The physicians treating him, as well as his brothers and disciples, became much worried and thought that a sea-voyage might restore his health. So in June, 1899, in conformity with their wish, Swamiji sailed for the West for the second time, accompanied by Swami Turiyananda and Sister Nivedita. Mahapurush and a large crowd of monks and devotees were present at the pier in Calcutta to see Swamiji off. Having had the opportunity to rest and relax for over a month, Swamiji felt very much better when he arrived in America, and his old friends, acquaintances and students were delighted to see him back. As before, Swamiji toured America, lecturing to different groups, training disciples and organizing the Vedanta movement. His presence and activities gave an added impetus to the work, but by the end of 1900 he felt that he should return to India, and he did so after placing the different American centres in the hands of some

of his brothers. It was a pleasant surprise to see Swamiji back in India; Mahapurush and the brothers at Belur were delighted to have him in their midst again.

In 1900 Swami Shivananda accompanied Swami Vivekananda to the Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati in the Himalayas, a monastery founded under the inspiration of Swamiji by two of his English disciples, Captain and Mrs. Sevier. Both the Swamis were charmed by the natural scenery of the place, but their stay at the ashram was brief on account of Swamiji's ill health.

From 1902 to 1909 Swami Shivananda lived in Benares, devoting his energies to the work of founding a monastery there. The circumstances which led to the establishment of this monastery were as follows: Swami Vivekananda, shortly before his death, was given by the Rajah of Bhinga a donation of Rs. 500 to be used for the dissemination of Vedanta. Thinking that the money would be best utilized by starting an ashrama in Benares, Swamiji gave the sum to Mahapurush, commissioning him to undertake the work, and the latter readily agreed.

The Rajah of Bhinga, well-known for his extensive charities, was a pious man who devoted the last years of his life to God and spiritual pursuits. In reminiscence of the Rajah who was responsible for the starting of an ashrama in Benares, Mahapurush said later:

“He had great respect and veneration for Swamiji. In his old age he left his estate and pretentious home and lived like a recluse in a garden house adjoining Durgabari, the temple of



Standing—Swami Trigunatitananda
Sitting (L. to R.)—Swamis Shivananda, Vivekananda, Turiyananda and Brahmananda.
Sitting below—Swami Sadananda

the Goddess Durga, in Benares. He would not, by any means, leave the precincts of the garden. Coming to know that Swamiji was in Benares, he one day sent through a messenger a large baskets of fruits and sweets as a present to Swamiji and invited him to bless his place by a visit. He begged to be excused for not being able to come and see Swamiji himself because he had taken a vow not to move out of his garden. Swamiji was quite touched by the devotion of the Rajah and said, 'We are monks. He has been good enough to invite us; why shouldn't we go? Certainly we shall go.' Swamiji went to see the Rajah. I was with him. The Rajah received Swamiji with great devotion, invited him in and in the course of conversation said: 'For many years I have been watching with keen interest, appreciation and joy your activities. Yours is a very noble cause. You remind me of Buddha, Shankara and other Divine Incarnations who came for the establishment of religion. You have a similar mission. That your mission may succeed is my heart's wish!' The Rajah then offered Swamiji a donation of five hundred rupees for preaching in Benares."⁶

It so happened that on the opening day of the monastery, which was called the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Swami Vivekananda passed away, and the dedication festivities were, of course, marred by the tragic event. Swamiji's death was an incalculable blow to Mahapurush—indeed to all the brother disciples. In his eagerness to regenerate India and serve humanity he had shortened his life by overwork; he gave up the body at the early age of thirty-nine.

⁶ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

The seven years that Mahapurush spent in the ashrama in Benares proved a memorable chapter of his life; they were marked by austerity, devotion to duty and supreme resignation to God. The ashrama, which was a modest rented place, had a small beginning and its progress was seemingly slow. Rather than a centre of outward activity, it was a school of rigid discipline and self-denial, offering opportunity for character building. The Swami remained undaunted and undisturbed in the midst of all obstacles and trials, of which he had many, and he taught the few monks and novices who lived with him more by example than by precept.

As funds were insufficient, the Swami and all who lived at the ashrama had to be satisfied with the coarsest of food; luxuries were out of the question. The daily meals generally consisted of two or three pieces of unleavened bread, but at times they scarcely had even that. During most of the year the Swami spent his nights lying on a bench. In the winter months, usually very cold in Benares, he slept on straw, and himself made a straw mat to sit upon. The funds with which the ashrama was started dwindled fast, and a day came when a balance of only Rs. 60 remained. The rent for the house where the monastery was located had at that time not been paid for eight months. To make the situation worse, the entire amount of Rs. 60 was now stolen. When the Swami explained his predicament, the landlord was at first alarmed but finally agreed to accept payment of the arrears by instalments.

The life that Swami Shivananda lived in Benares during this period was characteristic of the true ascetic he had always been. Day and night he would remain absorbed in spiritual moods, not caring to talk or engage in activities or go anywhere, unless it was absolutely necessary. His daily routine consisted in meditation, japa, worship and perhaps a little reading. At three o'clock in the morning he would get up, light a ceremonial fire in the open hall on the first floor of the ashrama, and there with others would sit in deep meditation until forenoon. His meditations often caused an upsurge of spiritual emotions, and he would shed copious tears. The day on which there were no tears he would characterize as useless: "This day has been in vain; I couldn't shed a single tear for Him."

Here we have the picture of the Swami as a man of God, living on a transcendental plane, absolutely detached from things mundane. At the ashrama in Benares one could also see in the Swami a born leader with all the enviable qualities of head and heart. Quiet and unassuming, utterly selfless, regal in bearing and yet very democratic, frank and outspoken to a degree, self-reliant and independent, and above everything else kind and forgiving to a fault, he practised what he taught. His was a life which everyone would do well to imitate, even if one cannot understand or appreciate the mystical side of his personality. One never found him at any time doing anything unworthy of the great soul he had always been. At the ashrama he ate the same plain, coarse meals and had the same privileges. He would never think of allowing himself comforts and

amenities which others had not. Always reserved in manners, he was a man of few words and insisted on the co-operation of others in maintaining a quiet atmosphere and avoiding unnecessary loud talk or noise. Himself receiving no personal service from anyone, he was ever eager to serve others, even at the cost of his own convenience. The hired help employed to do some of the chores at the monastery were treated with due consideration and kindness—nay, as equals. He would never give orders to them nor take advantage of them, nor would he allow others to do so. The words “servants” and “menial works” were not in his vocabulary.

Outwardly indifferent and stern, the Swami had certainly a very tender heart full of sympathy. His fondness and solicitation for the monks and novices with whom he lived at the monastery were especially remarkable. In their hours of trial and tribulation he would cheer them and encourage them. He would wait upon them and care for them when they were sick. He always thought highly of those who renounced their hearth and home and the pleasures of the world for Sri Ramakrishna. Once he feelingly remarked: “You know, the boys living here are like young cobras. You should not belittle them. Whoever have taken refuge in His fold are great.” What he said he literally meant. To illustrate this we shall mention here one incident, small yet significant. It was one winter morning of 1904. A brahmachari from the headquarters came to Benares for a visit. After warmly receiving the new arrival the Swami got

busy right away, prepared tea and served a light breakfast to him. And he did this with so much love that the guest was visibly moved. He mildly protested, feeling embarrassed at receiving all this personal service from a venerable direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. There were other junior monks who would have been only too glad to do this work, but Mahapurush would not be satisfied unless he did this himself.

During his sojourn in Benares the Swami met several holy men and must have had interesting conversations with them, of which we do not have much record. Once he briefly said: "I didn't have the good fortune of meeting Pavhari Baba. But I saw Trailanga Swami twice; the first time he was seated, the other time he was resting in a reclining posture. With Swamiji, Gopalda and Baburam Maharaj I went to see Bhaskarananda Swami. He was a monk noted for his great austerity. Highly respected in aristocratic circles, he had more than a dozen princely disciples. I learnt about Chameli Puri much later. He was a man of great renunciation, very fond of children, whom he treated with sugar pellets and roasted gram. A devotee of the Divine Mother Durga, he used to observe fasts for nine days during the Navaratri festival every year. Magniram, whom I met, was all his life a typical *naishthika brahmachari*, practising rigidly the vows of a novice and celibate. Although dispassionate and pure in heart, he was not wholly free from the caste consciousness of having been born a Brahmin."⁷

⁷ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

We have mentioned that Mahapurush lived in Benares rather a quiet life, seldom going out or having much outward activity. His silent, devout and consecrated life attracted quite a few seekers of Truth and distinguished scholars of Benares. They would frequently visit the ashrama and sit at the Swami's feet, seeking his blessing and advice. He would talk with them informally and share his experiences and ideas with them without the least trace of ego or fanfare. His method of preaching and service was typical of him. About the spirit of work he once said to the monks of the Order: "The Lord does His own work. You and I are simply His instruments. Live your life, keeping your gaze fixed at His feet, and whatever is necessary He will have done by you, if He so chooses. Can anything be accomplished just by making plans, and can it really help the world? The man who has gone through a lot of spiritual discipline, the Lord makes such a person His blessed instrument; he alone can work in the right spirit. Work that lacks the spirit is waste of energy."⁸

For the education of the boys of the neighbourhood the Swami conducted a small school at the ashrama, he himself instructing them in English. Further, to spread the teachings of Vedanta among the Hindi-speaking public he had the Chicago addresses of Swami Vivekananda translated into Hindi.

Since Swami Shivananda's day the Rama-krishna Advaita Ashrama in Benares has grown

⁸ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

into a fairly large monastic institution, providing food and shelter for several spiritual aspirants. It was Swami Shivananda, man of God, who laid its foundation firmly by his silent, steady and meditative life. This is certainly in keeping with the Indian belief that a religious institution can be of great and lasting benefit to humanity only if it has for its foundation the austerities and realizations of a saint. As Benares is the spiritual capital of India, the centre of all Indian religious revivals, the ashrama will probably, in course of time, achieve tremendous proportions, and posterity will undoubtedly give the credit for its success to the Swami.

CHAPTER V

PRELUDE TO THE GREAT ACT

IN 1909 Swami Shivananda turned over the management of the ashrama in Benares to a monk of the Order and returned to the Belur monastery. Here at Belur he lived continuously for about thirteen years, with the exception of some shorter or longer trips here and there and in the Himalayas, until he became the spiritual head of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. This period of thirteen years may fitly be described as a prelude to the great act ahead of him. We may not be able to write a detailed chronological account of the Swami's life at this time, but we shall record here some significant incidents and events, remarks and observations, which will throw a flood of light upon the personality and character of the Mahapurush that was to play such a dynamic role in the near future.

Here at Belur, as in Benares, one would see the Swami in the same ascetic moods, finding delight in meditations and austerities, indifferent to the world and its pleasures, and yet whenever occasions demanded it he would be so kind and compassionate to those with whom he had dealings! Writes a monk, an eye-witness:

“I have seen Mahapurush live his life and work at the math since 1908—when I first joined the Order. He always seemed absorbed in his own thoughts, and what an austere life he lived! He wore around his loins a simple cloth reaching to the knees—the upper part of his body and feet were bare—and so dressed he walked up and

down the monastery grounds unconcerned. Sometimes he would sit on a bench on the front verandah of the monastery building facing the Ganga, so abstracted that by looking at him one received the impression that he had no relationship with the external world. His eyes were so indrawn that he paid no attention to people coming and going.”¹

It was Swami Premananda, one of the foremost monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who was at that time in charge of the monastery at Belur. Swami Brahmananda, president of the Order since Swami Vivekananda had turned that office over to him in 1900, being for some years busy with other of the many duties of his office, entrusted the management of the Belur monastery to Swami Premananda. Swami Premananda performed the regular daily worship at the shrine, attended to the various other duties connected with the math, and also looked after the physical and spiritual needs of the monks and devotees. At times when he was sick or away in Calcutta or elsewhere on business, Mahapurush would have to manage things and perform the worship, and he did everything with so much love and feeling! Regarding his worship at Belur he once said: “Our worship at the shrine was more an act of love and devotion, having none of the external grandeur of ritualistic observances as prevalent in these days. While doing the worship we would think of the Master as visibly present there as we had seen him at Dakshineswar in his room seated on his cot, and we would worship

¹ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

him, following the simplest procedure. Although, to a certain extent, we observed some of the orthodox rules and forms, we never stressed them. Our services at the shrine didn't have the least trace of ostentation. Sri Ramakrishna is the Lord of our hearts, and what he wants from us is genuine devotion and self-dedication."²

Writes Swami Atulananda, then known as Brahmachari Gurudas:

"I met the Swami at the western tea-verandah of the main monastery building at Belur on the very day when I arrived from America. He was seated on a bench smoking his hubble-bubble. There were several other monks besides a number of devotees present at the place. After introduction and exchange of greetings, the Swami was kind enough to make me sit beside him on the bench—a signal honour. Referring to the peculiar sound produced by the hubble-bubble he joked and wanted me to believe that there was a live frog inside that made the noise. Then showing me how to smoke the hubble-bubble he was gracious enough to let me use his own pipe. At the time I took the incident rather casually, because in our society smoking is an everyday affair, involving no etiquette or ceremony. Besides, I thought of the incident as a plain joke, never realizing that it could have any other meaning. But later as I became better acquainted with Hindu society and its customs, it dawned upon me that by letting me use his own pipe Mahapurush paved the way for my easy acceptance as a member, in addition to making a gesture of endearment."³

The incident, though simple, made a deep im-

²⁻³ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*



Banaras
1910

pression upon Swami Atulananda's mind, giving him an insight into Mahapurushji's generous heart. Swami Atulananda, originally of Dutch extraction, domiciled in the United States, had for many years been living in India. We shall also mention here another touching incident which brings out Mahapurushji's kindness to people visiting the monastery. An Indian Christian from Madras paid a visit to the Belur Math one day. Mahapurushji received him and talked to him sympathetically. The man was so moved by the Swami's magnetic personality and saintliness that when leaving the monastery he observed with tears in his eyes: "I have travelled far and wide all over India since I left Madras. In most places I have been treated with indifference and scant respect, because of my alien religion. Nowhere else than here have I found such love and consideration! It was beyond my imagination!"⁴

In the summer of 1910 Mahapurush went on a pilgrimage to the sacred Himalayan cave of Amarnath in Kashmir, in company with the Swamis Turiyananda and Premananda and a few junior monks of the Order. Here in this natural cave, in an ideal setting, an ice formation, existing for centuries, is worshipped as an emblem of Shiva, and every year thousands of pilgrims from different parts of India come here to worship. This pilgrimage, though arduous and difficult, proved a source of great spiritual exaltation to the Swamis. At Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, the Swamis stayed for a while, visiting nearby holy places and points

⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

of interest. Unfortunately, on his return to Belur, Mahapurush had a severe attack of dysentery, from which he recovered only after long treatment. As a result, he became extremely careful about his food, and he followed the strict regimen then undertaken until the end of his life.

That year, shortly before the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, Lady Minto, the wife of the then Viceroy and Governor-General of India, paid a visit to the Belur Math. It was Mahapurush who received Her Excellency, talked with her and showed her around. They had a very interesting conversation. Lady Minto was very much impressed by the Swami's gracious hospitality, breadth of vision, frank and outspoken ways and supremely spiritual character. Regarding this visit the Swami once remarked : " She comes of such an aristocratic family, and yet how humble, affable and soft-spoken she is! Lady Minto had the idea that it was Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) who founded the Order. In the course of conversation I explained to her that it was not Swamiji or any other disciple who was responsible for it; it was Sri Ramakrishna himself who initiated the Order during his last illness at Cossipore. At that time the Master took Swamiji aside and taught him how to organize and conduct the work, telling him the secrets of the monastic organization to be. That was the foundation of the math. Lady Minto seemed to be much surprised at learning this from me."⁵

In August, 1911, Swami Ramakrishnananda, a

⁵ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and one of the stalwart executives of the Order, passed away at the comparatively youthful age of forty-eight. He was stricken with tuberculosis of a severe type, and bore patiently and resignedly the attendant pains, until he succumbed after a protracted illness of several months. Unlike most of his brothers who had gone out as itinerant monks, practising austerity after Sri Ramakrishna's passing away, Swami Ramakrishnananda had stuck to his post at Baranagore, and later at Alambazar, devotedly worshipping the relics of the Master and caring for those who happened to be at the monastery. Later, at the request of Swami Vivekananda, he had gone to Madras and founded a math there for the preaching of Vedanta. For years he had struggled valiantly against apathy and prejudice until he succeeded in establishing the influence and prestige of the Order all over South India. The many monastic, educational and philanthropic institutions that the Ramakrishna Mission now has in South India owe their origin and inspiration to Swami Ramakrishnananda and his consecrated life. His death was a great blow to Mahapurush and the Order. Mahapurush once feelingly said in connection with Swami Ramakrishnananda: "The ways of the Lord are inscrutable! Shashi Maharaj (Swami Ramakrishnananda) served the Master so devotedly! Look at his sufferings during his last illness! The Lord can slay His goat for sacrifice at the tail or at the neck, in any manner He chooses! Blessed be the Lord and His play! The way in which Shashi Maharaj served the Master and worshipped the

relics was extraordinary—a thing worthy of admiration! His worship at the shrine made one feel as if the Master were a living presence there. If you want to know something about whole-souled service, look at the life of Shashi Maharaj.”⁶

On another occasion he said:

“Swami Ramakrishnananda was a living embodiment of love and purity. Rarely one comes across such love and purity. The faith and devotion he had for Sri Ramakrishna, the idol of his heart, were extraordinary and were on a par with those of Mahavira for Sri Rama. His love and deep feeling for the Swamis Vivekananda and Brahmananda and other brothers, whom he considered as inseparable limbs of the Master, bordered on worship. In his dealings with people he made no such distinctions as high and low, rich and poor. He was ever solicitous for everybody’s welfare. He received all with open arms and gave them his unstinted love. To serve the Lord in all and help them realize the Divine within—that was the motto of his life. He practised what he wanted others to follow. He came into this world for Sri Ramakrishna and served him with his whole heart and soul. Shashi Maharaj fully deserves the name Ramakrishnananda that was given him by Swami Vivekananda.....with his own blood Swami Ramakrishnananda laid the foundation of the immense work that is now being done in Sri Ramakrishna’s name in South India. With the passing of days people will appreciate more and more his influence and loving service.”⁷

What Mahapurush said here indicates the deep love and veneration he had for his brother, Swami Ramakrishnananda.

⁶⁻⁷ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

After living for about a year at the Belur Math, Mahapurush for reasons of health went to Kankhal near Hardwar, Uttar Pradesh, accompanied by the Swamis Brahmananda and Turiyananda. Hardwar and Kankhal are two holy places ideally located on the swiftly flowing Ganga, in the view of some of the Himalayan ranges. They are frequented by pilgrims from different parts of India, and have very old spiritual associations. Mahapurush and the Swamis stayed at the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama at Kankhal, a charitable hospital conducted by the monks of the Order, and they had a wonderful time. That year in autumn, under the inspiration and direction of Swami Brahmananda, Mother Durga was worshipped in the image at the ashrama in Kankhal. The worship of Mother Durga—the supreme creative energy, the creator, protector and saviour, providing spiritual illumination and liberation as well as the things of this world—is the most widely celebrated and the grandest religious festival of India. To celebrate it at Kankhal, an out-of-the-way place, was quite an undertaking. The image came all the way from Calcutta in Bengal, and the function lasting for three days was a great religious event, causing unusual fervour and rejoicing. In this all the Swamis and members of the ashrama, as well as the local public, participated. After staying in Kankhal for about seven months, Mahapurush returned to Benares. The members of the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, the monastery that Mahapurush had founded a few years before, and the workers of the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, a hospital conducted along similar lines as the

one at Kankhal, were very glad to have Mahapurush again in their midst.

During Mahapurushji's short sojourn at this time in Benares four devotees from Bengal came to the ashrama to pay their respects to him. One of these devotees, repentant for certain misdeeds he had committed, was in tears, overwhelmed with emotion. He opened his heart to the Swami and said: "Maharaj, I shudder to think of the many sins I have committed in my life! You are a great soul! Please be gracious and do something to help me". The Swami, visibly moved by the man's earnest appeal, remained silent for a minute and then said: "What have you done? Are you addicted to drinking or some other vice?" When the devotee in reply stated that he did not have any vice of that sort, the Swami observed with great tenderness: "Then, what sins are you referring to, my child? Haven't you heard Sri Ramakrishna's words to this effect? He used to say: 'Sins are like a mountain of cotton. Even as a tiny spark of fire can reduce to ashes the mountain-high cotton, so does a little of divine grace heaps of sins.' Don't be afraid. Call upon the Lord and repeat His sacred and potent name; nothing else will be needed."⁸ All present felt the force of the Swami's words. Thus encouraged by the Swami and following his advice the man gradually changed the course of his life, making definite progress in his spiritual strivings.

Benares, the city of Shiva, always evoked great spiritual fervour in the Swami. He was in excellent

⁸ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

spirits—meditative and abstracted most of the time, as is indicated by the following incident. The monks of the ashrama decided to have a photograph of the Swami and one day hired a professional photographer for the purpose. Mahapurush finally agreed after much persuasion, and as desired by all concerned sat on a carpet in the usual cross-legged meditative posture with a kamandalu (water vessel carried by monks) on one side. As the photographer with his camera set was trying to get the right pose and light, Mahapurush became absorbed in one of his deepest meditative states, lost to all outward consciousness, his body rigid like a graven image, his eyes fixed on the point between the eyebrows. All were at a loss as to what to do. Swami Turiyananda, who happened to be there, nudged Mahapurush to bring him down to the normal plane, so that the photographer could snap his picture. It was indeed a unique phenomenon!

In November, 1914, Swami Shivananda returned to the headquarters at Belur and stayed there for about eight years. During this period, although he made some journeys to different places, far and near, he was mostly at Belur. It was perhaps in March of 1915, soon after the birthday celebration of Sri Ramakrishna, that Mahapurush went to Ranchi in Bihar, in response to an invitation from a group of devotees. These devotees, most of them disciples of the Holy Mother, deeply interested in the teachings of the Master and Swamiji, used to meet regularly in different homes, engaged in readings, discussions, meditations and devotional singing. Occasionally they would have

religious celebrations, and they wanted Mahapurush to bless their big annual celebration by his presence.

Writes an eye-witness:

“The Swami was here only for three or four days, and yet during that short time he gave us such heavenly joy! The blessed memory of those days has sweetened our life and brings even today an unspeakable thrill. On the day of the celebration, as a part of our program, he performed the worship. His worship was simple and yet so impressive, having none of the pompous recitation of sacred texts. After taking his seat for worship he remained absorbed in deep meditation for a long time and then gently and with great devotion offered flowers at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother. And he concluded the worship by prostrating himself before the altar. As he stood up I noticed his blood-shot eyes and radiant face, suffused as it were, with a divine glow. Just then an elderly lady devotee came forward and saluted the Swami. To her he said: ‘Tell me what you wish for!’ The lady earnestly and in all seriousness replied: ‘Liberation!’ To this Mahapurush said: ‘All right, may you have liberation! I will pray to the Lord for you!’ As he uttered these words his voice was solemn and yet full of unusual tenderness.

“As soon as the feeding of the poor, the next item of our celebration, was finished, there was a cloudburst accompanied by a strong wind, and this continued for a while. In keeping with the rhythm of the pelting rain and the storm we started dancing, while singing Swami Vivekananda’s song on Shiva that begins: ‘Shiva is dancing, lost in the ecstasy of the Self.’ Mahapurush stood there deeply absorbed in an ecstatic mood and later remarked: ‘As you were singing

and dancing, it sounded like an explosion of bombs (the World War I was going on at the time). I too joined in your singing and dancing.' The day after the celebration he took us to an adjoining field and we all sat under a mango tree. The Swami sang a devotional song and talked informally on spiritual matters. On Dolpurnima day we visited Tapovan, and he was in ecstasy when he had the darshan of Rama-Sita and Jagannath, the deities at the temple. In a melodious voice he sang the refrain 'Glory be unto Sri Radha and Govinda,' clapping his hands the while. His voice was so sweet that it is still ringing in our ears. He was in raptures as he sang! Then, as he was recounting some intimate incidents from the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother, a devotee said in a note of sadness: 'Maharaj, we merely hear about the Master; we do not have the good fortune of seeing him with our eyes!' Quickly Mahapurush rejoined: 'Why! He who hath seen the Son, hath seen the Father. I and my Father are one!' Startled by his statement we stood there looking at him with admiration. His solemn words are still echoing in our ears."⁹

From Ranchi Mahapurush returned to the monastery at Belur, and it was not long before he started on a new trip. For some time Swami Turiyananda had been sick in Calcutta, suffering from conditions brought on by diabetes. It was thought that a change of climate would be beneficial to him, so Mahapurush offered to accompany the Swami to Almora in the Himalayas. The bracing climate, the sun, air and water of the Himalayas helped Swami Turiyananda, and within a short time he felt decidedly better. The two brothers were very

⁹ *Mahapurush Shivananda.*

happy together, meditating, reading and exchanging ideas. It was at this time that Mahapurush had the opportunity of purchasing a place in Almora for a monastery; he was glad that he could at last fulfil Swami Vivekananda's wish expressed long ago. The newly founded monastery was named Ramakrishna Kutir.

Swami Premananda, in charge of the monastery at Belur, was doing splendid work quietly, spreading the message of Vedanta. His radiant and loving personality and forceful spiritual talks drew many devotees, young and old, to Belur, and they adored him. In response to an earnest invitation in the summer of 1916 from some devotees of East Bengal, now East Pakistan, the Swami went on a tour of that part of the country and inspired hundreds of men and women by his message. On the way however, he contracted a virulent type of kala-azar from which he suffered for many months—actually, until he passed away in July, 1918. During his lingering illness and treatment in Calcutta the management of the Belur monastery fell upon the shoulders of Swami Shivananda, who had been one of its original trustees and also a member of the Governing Body of the Mission.

The untimely death of Swami Premananda (he was only 55 when he died) was a staggering blow to Mahapurush and the Order. Regarding his inner feeling Mahapurush once stated: "After the death of Baburam Maharaj (Swami Premananda) I felt in my heart an emptiness that cannot be described in words. Many times I was tempted to go back to the Himalayas and there remain absorbed in a

transcendental spiritual state—in samadhi beyond all relative categories—having nothing to do with phenomena any more.” But that was not to be. Considerations of duty and love of the Order, perhaps also some unseen divine force, deterred him, and he brushed aside this impulse. Gradually he began to take an interest in the work again. His love and veneration for Swami Premananda were too deep for expression. We quote here two brief letters which he once wrote from Almora to Swami Premananda :

“Has the stream of Premananda’s love ceased to flow and reach us here? Is it incapable of climbing these Himalayan heights? Mother Ganga and other rivers start their downward course from here—these rocky, dreary regions. How can we devotees remain quiet then? So I am writing you today. I thought that now that you have returned from Puri I might hear from you. So many days have elapsed since! However, do tell me how you are doing physically. I haven’t received any letters from the math since you left.”¹⁰

“I was delighted to get all the news from your long letter. It bespeaks your great love and thoughtfulness. My heart seems to run dry if I don’t receive letters from you, like this. The grace of our Master is so powerful that it does away with all so-called barriers, making even the downward stream leap upward. Science is fighting nature. The pump, installed to bring up water here, is working against the laws of nature—gravitation. The love of great ones like you can surely bless embodied souls by surmounting the steep, bleak heights of ignorance.”¹¹

¹⁰⁻¹¹ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

About Swami Premananda Mahapurush wrote again :

“The teachings that Baburam Maharaj received from Sri Ramakrishna entered into his bone and marrow, forming the very foundation of his character and personality. While talking to devotees and seekers and helping them in solving their spiritual problems, he was guided by these teachings as basic truths. He was always filled with the Master’s ideas. Naturally, all those who came to him would be imbued with deep love and veneration for the Master. By his unique selfless love he conquered the hearts of people and transformed their lives completely. It was because of this extraordinary love of his—this solicitation for the welfare of others—that he fell a victim to a serious illness, eventually resulting in his untimely death. During this sickness he suffered much and his body was reduced to a skeleton, and yet he was never found to be disturbed or upset. He would always repeat the name of the Lord as he had done when well. ‘It is grace, the grace of the Lord that counts or matters,’ he constantly repeated. From time to time there come to this world a class of men who remain absolutely detached from the pleasures of the senses and name and fame and are engaged in doing good to humanity by pointing out the way to God. Sri Ramakrishna called such souls ‘Iswarkotis’, because they represent special manifestations of God and His saving power. He classed Baburam Maharaj as one of that blessed group and often told us about it..”¹²

Swami Premananda was like an affectionate mother to both the monks and devotees at Belur. His loss was irreparable. Especially did the many devotees who had been attracted by the Swami miss

¹² *Patravali* (Letters of Swami Premananda)—Foreword.

him very much. Some of them stopped coming to the math altogether, thinking mistakenly that now that Baburam Maharaj was gone they would not be as welcome. Mahapurush noticed this when he took over the management of the monastery and felt very bad. He left no stone unturned to remedy the situation by being specially nice and kind to all devotees. Once to such a group that had come after a long absence he said: "Why don't you come nowadays? I know the reason. Do come as before. Know for certain that I love you as much as did Baburam Maharaj." He uttered these words with so much feeling that all present were touched, realizing that under his seemingly ascetic exterior Mahapurush had a very soft and tender heart. From then on they continued their visits to the math quite regularly and without any hesitancy. To a senior monk Mahapurush once remarked: "All these years I had been out of close touch with people and their affairs. That is why I can't deal with them and speak to them in a way that might appeal to their hearts."

Now that Mahapurush had been placed in charge of the monastery at Belur he had added responsibilities—responsibilities that were great and sacred. He was compelled to change his usual pattern of life and he began to mix more freely with people, taking keen interest in their physical and spiritual wellbeing. Gradually, the ascetic that people had known him to be all these years yielded place to the devoted and tireless karma-yogi, living a busy life, doing everything in a spirit of dedicated service. In addition to his accustomed meditation

and worship, every day he attended to many a duty connected with the monastery, such as receiving and talking to visitors, giving spiritual instructions to monks and devotees, supervising the various departments, helping and guiding the workers conducting them, and doing similar things. The shrine, the kitchen, the office, the clinic—all received his loving scrutiny and attention. With the passing of days, his native desire to be of help and service to people increased in volume and intensity. Of course, the monks and devotees had always a large share of his fostering care; so did the hired helpers like the sweepers and labourers, the cooks and servants working at Belur. Even the monastery cows supplying milk and the flowers and plants in the garden had a touch of that love. We shall present here some more glimpses which depict this phase of Mahapurushji's life at this time.

In those days, especially during the rainy season, because of the unsatisfactory sanitary conditions, Belur and the nearby villages used to have epidemics of malarial fever, diarrhoea and such other sickness. Not more than two dozen monks and novices were at the monastery to carry on the work; many had to be away in other centers for reasons of health. From August on to the end of October the monastery was like a hospital ward, full of sick people. Sometimes because of the lack of sufficient workers even the regular routine activities could not be managed adequately. Owing to the paucity of funds the patients could not be provided with proper diet and medicine, and they had a hard time to recuperate during their con-

valescent period. Mahapurush was naturally much concerned. He would try his best to make it easier for the sick monks, waiting upon them and cheering them up. Sometimes he himself prepared sago, barley water, soup or broth for the patients and taught others to do it. Many times he was present on the spot when the patients had their meals, watching them eat and even feeding them with his own hands.

Since the earliest days the monastery at Belur had been conducting a small free clinic and dispensary for the benefit of the neighbouring community as well as for the monastics.

Writes the monk then in charge of the clinic:

‘It was the rainy season. All around there was sickness especially malarial fever. The number of outside patients visiting the clinic was fast growing. To make the situation worse the compounder assisting me fell ill. I found it very difficult to manage the work alone. One day Mahapurush dropped in at the clinic and after hearing the report of the work said feelingly: ‘I see that you have a hard time doing the work by yourself. Shall I help you a little?’ In reply I said: ‘Why Maharaj! No! That is not necessary. Please bless me that I may manage it myself.’ There was no end to his worries when anyone happened to be sick at the math. He would insist on having reports twice or thrice a day, eager to know as to how the patients were doing. Ah! How much concerned he was for us! How deep was his love for us!’¹³

In those days the monastery at Belur did not have even piped water, not to speak of some of the

¹³ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

modern facilities and luxuries. The water for drinking, cooking and other purposes had to be brought in from the river Ganga by the monks themselves. Mahapurush saw that the water for drinking, was filtered, and yet it caused a lot of stomach upset. It was much later, perhaps in 1921, that a water pipe was installed at the math to the relief and convenience of all. Because of the uncertainty as to visiting guests and their number as well as for other reasons, it was difficult in those days to keep up the regularity of meals at the monastery, but Mahapurush from now on laid down the rule that at least the main meal should be served punctually at twelve noon, and he saw to it that this rule was observed for the health of everybody; this helped matters to a certain extent. Besides, it was Mahapurushji's constant endeavour to improve the quality of the food, so that the monks had sufficient nutrition.

Soon after the stringent rules regarding the regularity of meals had been enforced, a stranger came one afternoon to the monastery at Belur and expressed the wish to have dinner. It was quite late; the dinner had long since been served, and the dining room and kitchen put in order, with no cooked food left. As it was not possible to prepare a dinner at that odd hour, the man had to be told so. Disappointed, the man grumbled for a while and then left the monastery grounds. Swami Shivananda noticed this from his room upstairs and felt very bad, to think that a hungry man had been turned away. In order to mend matters he sent an attendant right away to look for the man and bring him back, with specific instructions to give him

something to eat—puffed rice, fruits or sweets. Strange as it may seem, all efforts to locate the man were in vain and the incident caused much pain in the heart of Mahapurush. From then on the monk in charge of the kitchen was told emphatically not to let an incident like this happen again. A hungry man should never be allowed to go away without being fed.

In the beginning of 1919, because of a severe drought and consequent failure of crops, some parts of West Bengal and Bihar were visited by a very bad famine. Bankura and Santhal Pergānas were the worst hit. As Mahāpurush read from newspapers the harrowing details of the acute sufferings of people due to scarcity of food, he was pained beyond words. The Ramakrishna Mission organized relief work, sending monks and novices to the affected areas. In an emergency like this the workers had to suffer a lot of inconvenience and discomfort while trying to help people. Mahapurush cheered and inspired them by driving home the glory of selfless service. For instance, he wrote to one : “ I sincerely pray that the blessed form of the Lord be ever present in your heart, and may He give you the strength to carry on the work—the service of God in men in distress! May there be rain in that area alleviating the sufferings of men and women caused by drought! Only God who dwells within my heart knows my inner pain when I hear about the distress of people. I see no other way out of this dire condition except His grace.”¹⁴

¹⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

To another he wrote: "You expressed the wish that after finishing the relief work you might engage in spiritual practice in a secluded spot for a while. That's a splendid idea! It shows that the Lord is especially gracious to you. It is your selfless deeds that account for this spiritual impulse. It is the fruit of your dedicated service—the service of the living God."¹⁵

While conveying the New Year's blessings and best wishes to another group Mahapurush wrote:

"May the New Year bring you all peace—peace to India and peace to the whole world! May your faith and devotion be ever steady at His blessed feet! Peace, genuine peace, can come only through religion. Even worldly success and prosperity cannot be lasting without religion. The harmony of religions as embodied and exemplified in our Master's life is a novel idea — an idea badly needed for this age. The entire world will gradually come to know of this idea and it will eventually and without doubt be universally accepted and practised in our society. Of course, nobody exactly knows how. Many may consider this an Utopian idea, not practical. In the life of a Divine Incarnation, what is usually considered impossible becomes an accomplished fact. Through His grace, if you live long enough, you will certainly be surprised to see miracles happening. And you will dance with joy and say: 'Glory be unto God — Glory be unto God Incarnate!'"¹⁶

In the autumn of 1919, Mahapurush had the inspiration to celebrate the worship of Mother Durga at Belur, thinking that it would offset the

gloom cast upon the monks by Swami Premananda's death, by enlivening the atmosphere. All at the math welcomed the idea, and elaborate preparations were being made. Orders were given to a sculptor in Calcutta to fashion the image, and a temporary canopy was set up on the brick inner court of the monastery where the altar with the image was to be installed. While supervising the preparations Mahapurush was in an unusually blissful and expectant mood. Two days before the commencement of the worship came the tragic news of a terrific hurricane followed by torrential rains which flooded a vast part of East Bengal. Many villages and towns were washed away and the loss of life and property was immense. Thousands of men and women were left homeless and the sufferings of people were very acute. Mahapurush was shocked by the news and thought within himself: "Why this calamity on the eve of the Mother's advent? Inscrutable are the divine ways!" He prayed fervently to the Mother to be merciful and come to the rescue of people in distress. The Ramakrishna Mission lost no time in organizing efficient relief work to cope with the situation, sending workers to the affected areas. These distributed food, clothes, medicines and other necessary things. The festivity and enjoyment of the celebration were marred to a certain extent by this catastrophe, but the function came off smoothly. On the second day of the worship Swami Brahmananda, who had been in Calcutta at the time, came to the math with a party of monks. On the third and last day of the worship arrived Swami Saradananda. The presence

of these two great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna in addition to that of Mahapurushji added to the happiness and solemnity of the occasion. As a final offering, devotional songs describing the glory of Mother Durga were sung in the evening of the last day in front of the altar, as is usually the custom. The entire monastic community headed by the Swamis Brahmananda, Saradananda and Shivananda, as also a large number of devotees, enthusiastically participated in the singing. A tremendous spiritual fervour reigned supreme and all were caught in the atmosphere, feeling vividly the presence of the Mother. As a climax to all, the great Swamis, unable to control themselves, stood up and began dancing in ecstasy while singing a particular refrain of a song. It was a sight for the gods to see—something never to be forgotten. We have already referred to the Durga puja celebration held at Kankhal in Uttar Pradesh, some years previously. It had been observed several times before in other ashramas as well as at the head monastery in Belur, but we have recorded this as typical.

During the latter part of 1919 Sri Sarada Devi, the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna, known amongst the devotees of the Order as the Holy Mother, became seriously ill in her paternal home at Jayrambati in West Bengal. The news caused much concern to Mahapurush and others at the math and elsewhere. For months she had been ailing from a bad attack of malarial fever with all kinds of complications which reduced her body to a skeleton making her very weak. As Jayrambati was an obscure village with no modern

medical facility at the time, it was felt that she should be moved to a city for treatment. As soon as her condition slightly improved she was brought to her Calcutta home at 1, Udbodhan Lane, Baghbazar. All kinds of remedies were tried and the best physicians available waited upon her, with no resulting signs of recovery. She wasted away and malarial fever developed into severe kala-azar, until after months of suffering she passed away in July, 1920. She was sixty-seven at the time of her death.

In spite of the many pains and afflictions that racked her body, the Holy Mother remained calm, peaceful and benign, ever ready to bless and comfort those who flocked to her bedside. The many attendants who lovingly cared for her say that during the last few days of her earthly life she became like a child of five with no attachment, and at times she would remain in a transcendental spiritual state, enjoying the bliss of union with the Lord. Her last words of advice given to a sad and discouraged woman devotee, were quite significant: "I tell you one thing: if you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others; rather learn to see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; this whole world is your own."¹⁷

Sri Sarada Devi, an ideal wife, disciple, nun and teacher all in one, closely linked with a Divine Incarnation of the stature of Sri Ramakrishna, is great in her own right. She represents the ideal of Indian womanhood, embodying purity, renun-

¹⁷ *Sri Sarada Devi*

ciation, sweetness, gentleness, understanding— perfection in the flesh. She was indeed an incarnation of mother-love. By her death Swami Shivananda, together with the other monks and devotees of the Order, was thrown into an ocean of grief. Humanly speaking, her loss was inestimable, for it meant the breaking of the first link of the saving power of God that had begun with Sri Ramakrishna. But very soon, deep down in their hearts, the monks and devotees felt that although they could not contact the Mother in the flesh, her protecting arms were still around all her children. Mahapurush, disconsolate at first, controlled his emotions to a certain extent and cheered the monks and devotees who felt orphaned by the Mother's death. His love and veneration for the Holy Mother came only next to that for Sri Ramakrishna. Wrote the Swami to a devotee:

“He who feels more keenly the loss of the Mother will certainly see her more within, thereby enjoying genuine peace. She was not an ordinary woman or a seeker on the path — not even one of those who *attained* the Goal. She was verily a manifestation of the Divine Mother — the Primal Energy, ever perfect. She is indeed the Mother of the universe, the same as the dormant spiritual power, the indwelling spirit in every living being. Blessed is the devotee who received initiation from her and had a taste of her utterly selfless love. The devotee who even once felt the touch of her loving hands in blessing is bound to be spiritually awakened, if he is not already awakened. This is my sincere conviction.”¹⁸

¹⁸ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

The Swami's high opinion of the Holy Mother as expressed in this letter and elsewhere was not a passing fancy or an exaggerated notion. It was a spiritual conviction based upon personal revelation and experience—something shared by the other direct disciples of the Master, including Swami Vivekananda.

Gradually, with the passing of days, the Order of Sri Ramakrishna gained in popularity, and the devotees visiting the monastery at Belur grew in number, while they showed great interest in the teachings. This pleased Mahapurush very much. He talked with all enthusiastically, inspiring and guiding them in their spiritual paths. A devotee from Bhavanipur, a suburb of Calcutta, where many distinguished families have their homes, expressed the wish to donate a home for an ashrama in memory of his deceased son. The Swami welcomed the idea, and in November, 1920, founded a monastery at the home given by the devotee, not far from the canal called Adi Ganga. The dedication ceremony was performed with due solemnity, attended by a large number of monks and devotees. The monastery was appropriately named Gadadhar Ashrama after the name of the devotee's son—a name by which Sri Ramakrishna used to be called in his boyhood. Mahapurush stayed at the ashrama for about three weeks and created a lofty spiritual atmosphere by his presence. Worship, meditation, reading, discussion and bhajan went on for days, contributing to the joy of all. One evening to a devotee who was nearby Mahapurush said: "Look! Now that Sri Rama-

krishna has been installed here for the good of many, let us have bhajan regularly every evening after vespers, for a while. The Master was very fond of bhajan. Hand me the drum, and all of you sing the song: ”

‘ Meditate, O my mind, on the Lord Hari,
The Stainless One, Pure spirit through and through.
How peerless is the light that in Him shines!
How soul-bewitching is His wondrous form!
How dear is He to all His devotees!

Ever more beauteous in fresh-blossoming love
That shames the splendour of a million moons.
Like lightning gleams the glory of His form,
Raising erect the hair for very joy.

Worship His feet in the lotus of your heart;
With mind serene and eyes made radiant,
With heavenly love, behold that matchless sight.
Caught in the spell of His love’s ecstasy,
Immerse yourself for ever more, O my Mind,
In Him who is Pure Knowledge and Pure Bliss. ’¹⁹

The bhajan went on for some time. Mahapurush joined in the singing, causing great spiritual fervour. By his stay at the ashrama the Swami attracted a large number of men and women of the locality, who became ardent devotees, offering to help the ashrama in various ways. Later on he handed over the management of the place to a monk of his Order and returned to Belur.

In January, 1921, on the occasion of Swami Vivekananda’s birthday celebration—always a great event at Belur—Mahatma Gandhi, accompanied by Mrs. Gandhi, Motilal Nehru and other political leaders visited the math. Mahapurush gra-

¹⁹ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda

ciously received the party and had very interesting conversations with them. In particular he took them to the shrine and to Swamiji's room. Mahatmaji showed keen interest in everything and eagerly examined the many precious relics treasured in the shrine, including the articles used by Sri Ramakrishna and specimens of his handwriting. With great reverence he touched the mat on which the Master had sat and slept. That day, as it always happens on festival days, a huge congregation consisting of men and women of various classes filled the monastery grounds. In response to the demand of the people Mahatmaji stood on the first floor front verandah of the main monastery building, facing the Ganges, and addressed the crowd. Among other things he said: "Please do not think for a moment that I have come here with the idea of preaching my doctrine of nonco-operation and the spinning wheel. I am here to offer my humble homage and salutations to the sacred memory of Swami Vivekananda on his birthday. I have studied Swamiji's writings well. As a result, my love for India has grown. To the youth of the country I have this appeal: 'Please do not leave empty-handed the monastery where Swamiji lived, moved and died without accepting some of his great ideas'."²⁰ I. was an impressive speech. The party left shortly afterwards. Mahapurush always thought very highly of Mahatmaji—his sincerity of purpose, sacrifice, courage of conviction and love for the down-trodden masses of India.

²⁰ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

That year in April, in response to an earnest invitation of the monks and devotees staying in South India, Swami Brahmananda, the head of the Order, made a trip to Madras. The immediate objective was the dedication and opening there of the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home. Mahapurush accompanied Sri Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) in compliance with his expressed wish. The party broke their journey at Bhuvanewar and Waltair, staying in each place for a short time, after which they arrived at their destination. It had been long, nearly twenty-four years, since Mahapurush had last visited Madras; that was in 1897, when he went there in order to receive Swami Vivekananda on his return from the West. During this period of over two decades many things had taken place and the Order had grown in prestige and influence, with many small and large ashramas in different parts of the province. It pleased Mahapurush very much to see the growth of the movement as well as the large influx of devotees. Of course, the monks and devotees of Madras were in supreme joy to have in their midst these two great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. The joy and fervour at the math knew no bounds.

Unfortunately, shortly after his arrival, Mahapurush had an attack of influenza and was bed-ridden for over a week. Swami Brahmananda was much concerned and saw to it that Mahapurush had the best care in every way. In May the opening and dedication ceremony of the Students' Home came off well. In the middle of June, Mahapurush accompanied Sri Maharaj and party to Bangalore. The ashrama in Bangalore, ideally located in the out-

skirts of the city with spacious grounds tastefully laid out in gardens, fascinated both the Swamis. Here they had a very peaceful and happy time. After staying for about two weeks in Bangalore, Mahapurush went to Mysore, the capital of the State of Mysore, a very clean and beautiful city. There a few miles from the centre of the city, perched on the top of a hill commanding a wonderful view of the surrounding country, is the famous temple of the Divine Mother, Chamundeshwari. Mahapurush visited the temple and took pleasure in worshipping the Deity. About it he said later: "Ah! The Mother is vibrantly living there. Through Her grace I had a wonderful darshan (vision)!" From this statement we presume that he must have had some unusual spiritual experience at the temple.

While away from Belur, touring South India, Mahapurush always kept himself informed about the doings and activities of the math. In the letters he wrote to different monks at the math he would always make detailed inquiries about everybody and everything, as is indicated by the following letter:

"This is the beginning of the malarial season. It will be lucky if you at the math escape attacks. By His grace, I have a feeling nothing untoward will happen at the math. You have to do a lot of work single-handed. Sometimes it cannot be helped. God willing, the work will not suffer. It will somehow be manged. I know that you love to care for the poor and the destitute. This is an expression of the compassion of the Lord, a sport of His. Is there anything greater than compassion? Are the cows hale and hearty? Are Prabhakar and the servants in good health?"

How are the dogs getting along? Is Varada doing well? Convey to all my hearty blessings. Will it be practicable for you to celebrate the worship of Mother Durga in the image this year? I shall be very happy if you can do it. Pray earnestly that you may do it.....Accept all of you my love and blessing. That you all make steady progress in the realm of the Spirit is my sincere prayer! ”²¹

After four months' stay in Bangalore and Mysore, Mahapurush finally returned to the monastery in Madras. The greatest and most significant religious event that happened there that year was the worship of the Divine Mother Durga in the image, performed for the first time in South Indian history. It was Swami Brahmananda's inspiration and fervent desire that eventually materialized in the celebration. It was also he who guided the details of the ceremony and made it a splendid success. Monks and devotees from different parts of South India in addition to the local monks and devotees flocked to the math and participated in the worship. Even today many talk with bated breath and evident thrill about this great celebration. It was not long after this that the Swamis and their party started on their journey back to Bengal. On the way they stopped at Bhuvanewar, as they had done before. Bhuvanewar is a holy place of unusual sanctity, with many beautiful ancient temples dedicated to Shiva. It is often described as another Benares—Secret Benares. Swami Brahmananda, charmed by the silence, beauty and peacefulness of the place, had founded there some years previ-

²¹ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

ously a fine monastery. He came here often and stayed for months during the latter part of his life. It was also his sincere wish and dream that this monastery be used by the monks of the Order for exclusive spiritual practice and study. Mahapurush stayed here for about two weeks, radiantly happy, exchanging notes with Sri Maharaj.

For some time past, the monks and devotees of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama in Dacca, East Bengal, had been requesting Mahapurush to come and pay them a visit. He also had a keen desire to see that part of the country, but something or other interfered, and he could not make the trip. In February, 1922, soon after his return from South India, he at last decided to go. Dacca had had the privilege before of being a host to Swami Vivekananda and other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. During all these years, the visits of the Swamis and their talks, as well as certain literature, had created considerable interest in the teachings and activities of the Order. As a result, East Bengal had in those days several ashramas, small and large, and contributed substantially to the lay and monastic following. Mahapurush, accompanied by some monks of Belur, finally arrived in Dacca, the principal city.

During his brief stay at the ashrama in Dacca, Mahapurush met many seekers of Truth, young and old, and was very much impressed by their earnestness and sincerity. Although he did not give any public lectures, he talked with people informally on God and other spiritual topics, explaining every problem in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's life and

teachings. His inspiring, heart-to-heart talks created quite a spiritual ferment in Dacca, and invitations came from different places. From Dacca the Swami went to Mymensingh and other towns in East Bengal. Everywhere scores of men and women, hungry for the vision of God, begged for initiation. All these years, in spite of persistent requests, Mahapurush never thought of giving formal initiation to anyone, relegating this special work of ministration to the Holy Mother and Swami Brahmananda. He felt that one should not initiate without receiving commission from above and some kind of divine sanction. At Dacca when people were repeatedly insistent, he lifted his soul to God in prayer, asking for guidance, and also wrote for advice to Swami Brahmananda, the head of the Order. Sri Maharaj wrote approvingly: "Do initiate people by all means, without any hesitation. Whoever will receive initiation from you will certainly be blessed." Simultaneously with the president's approval came the inner divine sanction in his prayers. So, gladly he initiated many devotees and took spiritual responsibility for them and he did this in Dacca as well as in other places.

That year, in the latter part of March, Swami Brahmananda, shortly after his return to Calcutta from Bhuvanewar, had an attack of cholera, which soon took a serious turn. The bad news reached Mahapurush in Dacca and he became much alarmed. One evening after meditation he said to the devotees who were near: "Maharaj is very ill. I cannot stay here any longer. Tomorrow I will leave for Calcutta. Make the necessary

arrangements." And right away he hurried to the bedside of his sick brother. While greeting Swami Brahmananda with tearful eyes he said: "Maharaj! Do get well. How can we live without you? You will certainly recover if you so wish." The best physicians available in the city were at hand, and many monks and devotees were in constant attendance, looking after Swami Brahmananda at the Calcutta residence of Balaram Bose, where he was lying ill. In spite of all efforts the Swami showed no sign of improvement and later developed the worst symptoms of diabetes—extreme weakness, discomfort and pain, so that his life was despaired of. The news of his critical illness spread far and wide, bringing to Calcutta many devotees and monks, eager to have a last look at Maharaj. During the last few days of his life he remained for most of the time absorbed in an exalted spiritual state, having visions and experiences. Every now and then from the depth of his being he would give utterance to some of his inner revelations. For instance, he said: "I am floating, as it were, on a raft of faith in the ocean of infinite bliss." Again he said: "Brahman alone is real, the universe is false."

Most of the time Mahapurush remained by the bedside of his brother, and every day either in Calcutta or at Belur he spent hours in meditation and prayer for his recovery. A few days before Swami Brahmananda's death, as Mahapurush was meditating in the shrine room at Belur he had an experience in which he saw Sri Ramakrishna. The Swami appealed to the Master for the recovery of

Maharaj, but the Master turned his face away and disappeared. As the Swami again concentrated his mind, he had the same vision and he repeated his appeal on behalf of his brother. Curiously enough, the Master averted his face as before and again vanished. For the third time the Swami prayed with the same result. He knew then that Maharaj would not live. On the 10th of April 1922, Swami Brahmananda, the dearly beloved Sri Maharaj of the Order, entered into mahasamadhi, being united with the Lord. He was only fifty-nine at the time of his passing.

Swami Brahmananda, whom Sri Ramakrishna had looked upon as his spiritual son, held a unique place in the Order; for nearly a quarter of a century he had been the head of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Possessed of a remarkable understanding of human nature, depth of vision and realization, as well as profound sympathy for everyone, he was a tower of strength and inspiration. Under his influence and leadership the activities of the Order had been consolidated and even considerably developed, and new centres of work, both in India and abroad, had been established. His loss was colossal, felt keenly by all, including Mahapurush. The deep love he bore for Maharaj bordered on worship; tirelessly and in the most superlative terms he expressed himself regarding Swami Brahmananda. In a subsequent chapter we shall quote his reminiscences of Sri Maharaj.



Belur Math
1923

CHAPTER VI

THE HEAD OF THE ORDER

AFTER the demise of Swami Brahmananda the Trustees of the Ramakrishna Math and the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission, together with all the monks, elected Swami Shivananda to the presidency of the Math and the Mission. As such he fell heir to a sacred trust coming not only from Swami Brahmananda, his immediate predecessor, but also from Swami Vivekananda and from Sri Ramakrishna—an Incarnation of God.

As president, Mahapurush became the living representative of Sri Ramakrishna, responsible for keeping intact and passing on the spiritual power that the Master had embodied and handed down to the Order. It was for him to see that all the centres, in India and elsewhere, should grow and expand, and that they should carry on their activities in consonance with the highest ideals; that all the lay devotees should receive proper attention and be given whatever guidance and opportunity they needed to make the maximum spiritual progress. His was the duty of initiating aspirants into spiritual life and also of granting monastic initiation to those who were prepared to become either novices or monks. He was responsible for all organizational work of relief service. It was expected that from him would radiate spiritual power and spiritual blessings; that in him all men would see Divinity

made real, living and utterly desirable; that his realization and enjoyment of God would be comprehensive, profound; that his example and inspiration would make others want to realise Him; and that he would teach them how to do so. The Swami accepted these stupendous and far-reaching responsibilities in all humility and discharged them in full measure. He was an indefatigable worker. Though his duties might seem divisible into those that were purely spiritual and those that were more or less temporal, he considered any work, however trivial or secular it might appear, to be essentially spiritual.

The exalted position that Mahapurush now assumed brought about a distinct transformation in his character. This transformation may be likened to a mellowing process that manifested in the Swami a great compassion and an intense desire for the service of man—the living God. It was a change that had really set in four years ago at the time when Mahapurush had taken over the management of the monastery at Belur after Swami Premananda's death. Now that he had become the head of the Order this changed outlook was all the more pronounced, removing the outward reserve which had concealed the tender heart, revealing the real Mahapurush—the guru overflowing with love, eager to help others. Thus we come to the second and the most fascinating phase of the Swami's life, which we shall try to depict in this chapter and the chapters that follow.

Swami Brahmananda's death was mourned by a wide circle of devotees and friends, as well as by

the many monks of the Order. As a tribute to his sacred memory, meetings were held in Calcutta and elsewhere, discussing his life and contribution to the country. A group of devotees of Bashirhat, a town not far from Calcutta, where the Swami had been brought up, organized a meeting, inviting Mahapurush to preside over its proceedings. He readily agreed and came to Bashirhat with several monks from Belur. His spiritual presence and inspiring talks instilled enthusiasm into the audience, and at his suggestion a committee was formed with the idea of establishing a free clinic and hospital or a suitable religious institution to commemorate Sri Maharaj. During this trip Mahapurush also visited the birthplace of Swami Brahmananda and other nearby towns, talking to people informally about his great brother and the ideas and ideals he had stood for, and then he returned to Belur.

Shortly after Swami Brahmananda's death, Swami Turiyananda, who had been staying for some time at the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama in Benares, became seriously ill. Mahapurush was alarmed when he received the news at Belur and said: "It is doubtful if Hari Maharaj (Swami Turiyananda) will survive this time. It all depends upon the will of the Lord."¹ The austerities that Swami Turiyananda had practised after his return from America had shattered his steel frame, and for years he had been suffering from a diabetic condition and its ill effects. Finally, a large carbuncle that had developed upon his back became malignant, to the dismay of everybody. Physicians

¹ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

from Calcutta were sent for and they did their best to remedy the condition, but with no success. Swami Turiyananda, Hari Maharaj to the monks and devotees, passed away in July, 1922. His death was an unusual phenomenon, befitting an illumined soul. Those who were at his bedside in Benares during his last illness unanimously declared that here was a real holy man who had conquered death. About this Mahapurush wrote to a devotee: "Our beloved Hari Maharaj breathed his last on Friday evening, July 22, 1922. He passed into Mahasamadhi, in a manner worthy of a yogi, in full consciousness, while chanting verses from the Vedas and uttering the name of the Lord. This is how the gross body ends; bodies of all embodied beings are mortal. You can well imagine how we feel at this time. Of course, God is ever present everywhere. This is the truth, otherwise we would not have been here all these days."²

One of the foremost monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Turiyananda was an ideal monk, ascetic and a knower of Brahman. The Master was very fond of him and thought highly of him, often classing him as a saint of the type described by Sri Krishna in the Gita—calm and serene, unconcerned about praise or blame, alike in pleasure and pain, self-possessed and self-contained, ever established in the supreme wisdom. Mahapurush had always cherished a deep love and respect for the Swami, and they had lived together for many years in the Himalayas as well as in the different monasteries of the Order.

² *Mahapurush Shivananda*

This is how he once expressed himself regarding Swami Turiyananda:

“ Hari Maharaj was a great soul—spotlessly pure and illumined like Sukadeva (a great knower of Brahman of ancient times). Since childhood he had been in the habit of reading the Gita, the Upanishads, Vivekachudamani and other such sacred texts. He mastered them and could recite them from memory. He was monk and ascetic *par excellence*, ever delighting in meditation and silence. Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) persuaded him to come to America for the preaching of Vedanta. Being of rather a conservative and orthodox temperament, he was at first reluctant to go abroad. But as he had great love for Swamiji he could not very well refuse the latter’s request. Hari Maharaj did not have the least blemish in his character; it was all virtue. His was a very pure life. He exemplified the ideals of knowledge, devotion, yoga and other such spiritual virtues.”³

The deaths in quick succession of Swami Premananda, Adbhutananda, the Holy Mother, Swami Brahmananda and Swami Turiyananda, who represented the very life and soul of the Math and Mission, created an abysmal void—something which was not to be easily filled. As the head of the Order, Mahapurush rose to his full spiritual stature and mustered courage, faith and devotion, trying to make the best of the existing condition, diligently attending to the various needs of everybody. Gradually through the grace of the Lord the darkened atmosphere brightened and the monks and devotees found in Mahapurush their accredited

³ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

spiritual father and leader. During the Swami's regime, in due course, the Order began to expand, gaining in prestige and influence and bringing to Belur an ever-increasing number of seekers—monastic recruits and lay devotees, who wanted spiritual guidance. Mahapurush tried his best to serve and help all. It was at Dacca in East Bengal that Mahapurush began giving initiation and taking spiritual responsibility for people. Thereafter he made many disciples. As a rule, he did not have the heart to refuse any eager and sincere candidate for initiation, even if it meant physical strain for himself. Of all the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Mahapurush had the largest initiated following, and they belonged to all walks of life and came from many parts of the world. Naturally, it was not possible for him to remember the names of all. He would say : "I cannot recall all the names. It is not I who initiate; it is the Lord who does it."⁴ Having not the slightest ego, the Swami never thought of himself as the guru nor took credit for anything. While initiating, his task was only to bring people to the Lord and dedicate them at His feet.

The Swami's humility and especially his faith in God and allegiance to Him were exceptional. This is shown clearly in certain remarks he made at one time. During a conversation at Belur he once pointed to his dog, saying, "That fellow's master is here,"⁵ and he indicated himself. Then, pointing one finger to himself and another to the

⁴ *Shivananda Vani*, 1

⁵ *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna*

shrine room, he added, "And this fellow's Master is there. I am His dog,"⁶ Again, on another occasion the Swami said to some devotees: "Even were I deprived of my tongue, the organ of speech, I should still think about Him and repeat His name. Nobody can take Him and His name away from me."⁷ The truth of this assertion was later to be fully demonstrated, for in old age, he became bed-ridden with a stroke and lost his speech, but nevertheless lived constantly in God.

As a rule, the Swami lived at Belur and from there supervised the many organizational activities as well as the spiritual well-being of individual monks and devotees. But occasionally, if necessary, he would leave Belur for other centres. In January, 1923, the members of the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama in Benares invited Mahapurush to visit them and dedicate a building constructed there in memory of Swami Adbhutananda, who had passed away two years previously. The building, a two-storeyed house was to treasure in one room some of the few articles used by Swami Adbhutananda and to have, in another, a marble image of Sri Mahavira⁸ and to be used as a shrine, the rest of the house serving as sleeping quarters for the monks.

Swami Adbhutananda, better known amongst the monks and devotees of the Order as Latu Maharaj, was a man of God in his own right—a direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Coming from

⁶ *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna*

⁷ From a devotee

⁸ An outstanding figure in the epic *Ramayana*, worshipped as an ideal embodying strength, purity, devotion and knowledge—a great devotee of the Divine Incarnation Sri Rama

a poor, obscure family with no educational background, he yet ranked very high because of his unusual spiritual attainments and was very dear to the Master. By his saintliness he later attracted around him a large number of devotees and he would talk to them inspiringly with his native, unlettered wisdom. Many adored him. The last few years of his life he spent in Benares, of which he was very fond because of its spiritual associations.

Mahapurush welcomed the invitation from Benares and was soon on his way with some monks from Belur. Instead of stopping in Benares he first went to Allahabad and stayed for a few days with Swami Vijnanananda, a brother disciple, in the latter's monastery. The two Swamis had a glorious time, exchanging notes and indulging in reminiscences. One day for the benefit of the many assembled devotees of Allahabad, Mahapurush recounted the interesting story of his austerities at Jhunsi, a spot near the confluence of the sacred rivers, not far from the metropolitan area of the city. In accordance with the express wish of Swami Vijnanananda many devotees in Allahabad received initiation from Mahapurush.

From Allahabad Mahapurush then came to Benares and on February 1, performed the dedication ceremony of the Adbhutananda memorial house, which was attended by a large number of monks and devotees as well as visitors from Patna, Lucknow, Kankhal and other places. On the dedication day the Swami gave monastic initiation to several candidates. The monks and workers of both the ashramas, the monastery and the hospital,

availed themselves of every opportunity to associate with the Swami and listen morning and evening to his spiritual talks in his own room. The Swami seemed to be very happy in Benares at this time and like most of the monks went out occasionally to have his bath in the Ganga and to visit some of the temples. Mahapurush always believed in the old maxim "a sound mind in a sound body," and he was hale and hearty in those days. It pleased him very much to see some boys of the sevashrama taking active interest in physical culture. They started something like a gymnasium where they would regularly practise wrestling and other forms of physical exercise. Like a young man of twenty the Swami watched them perform and encouraged them, asking them to keep on.

From Benares Mahapurush went next to Kankhal and stayed for about a week at the Mission Sevashrama there. The monks and devotees were very happy to have the president in their midst. Shortly after the Swami's arrival in Kankhal, it rained heavily one day, and then the atmosphere cleared up. As it was winter, it snowed hard on the distant Himalayan ranges, and they appeared gorgeous, covered with a white mantle. The Swami was delighted as he looked at the spectacle and like a boy laughed and said: "For years I hadn't seen snow. So Shiva, the Lord of the mountains, has been gracious to reveal Himself in His snow-white form today. Ah! How magnificent it is! The Himalayas are unthinkable without snow."⁹ One day he went with a group of monks to Hardwar and

⁹ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

visited Brahma-kunda, a portion of the sacred Ganga, where many have their ritualistic bath and worship. It has very old holy associations and is a place of pilgrimage. Sitting on the paved bank of the Kunda the Swami ecstatically chanted hymns, touched the water and made obeisance to the sacred stream. Later he said : “ At the time when we were in this region practising austerity—that was long ago—the whole area was like a forest—very solitary. One could scarcely see a human being anywhere here in those days. Now the place has grown into something like a town. It doesn’t have the seclusion of the olden times.”¹⁰ During Mahapurushji’s brief sojourn in Kankhal, the many monks and devotees of the Order who had been practising austerities by themselves in Hrishikesh, Bhimgora and other places, flocked to the ashrama to see the Swami and have the benefit of his holy association. At Kankhal also several received monastic initiation. Then after months’ absence, on the actual birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, Mahapurush and party returned to Belur, breaking their journey for a few days in Benares. The Swami was glad to be back in time to participate in the celebration, as it is the greatest religious event in the annual calendar of Belur.

Since the earliest times it has been the custom at the math to observe the actual birthday of Sri Ramakrishna separately with appropriate worship, devotion, bhajan, reading, etc., and it has been more or less a private affair attended by the many monks and devotees of the Order. For the convenience and benefit of the general public the Sunday follow-

¹⁰ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

ing is reserved for a celebration on a grand scale with festivity, devotional music and singing, lectures, feasting and fireworks as its important features. On such occasions as many as a hundred thousand people congregate at the monastery to participate in the function, and several thousands are fed on the open grounds. Special steam launches, buses, taxis and trains ply back and forth, bringing and returning the vast number of pilgrims. That year the private function came off nicely, many receiving initiation, and elaborate preparations were being made for the great public celebration. There were rejoicing, spiritual fervour and bustle in the air. But it so happened that in the evening previous to the Sunday scheduled for the public celebration it began to rain heavily, and this downpour continued without cessation until next morning. The Swamis in charge of the celebration became quite apprehensive, thinking that if the rain continued like that everything would be spoilt, and they were at a loss what to do. Finally, they approached Mahapurush and appealed to him to do something in order to remedy the situation. The Swami immediately went to the shrine, and after a while came out with a radiant face, reciting the following verse from the Srimad Bhagavatam: "Thou hast saved us ever from poisonous water, wild animals and demons, from rain, wind, lightning and fire, from our enemies and fears, O Lord!" Then, with great assurance, he said, "Go on making preparations for the celebration as usual. Through His grace everything will be all right."¹¹

¹¹ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

And, indeed, the rain stopped soon after. The sky cleared, the sun shone forth, and the day of the celebration was perfect.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, a devotee whose heart is wholly given to God is always taken care of: whatever he needs is providentially supplied, and what he has is safeguarded. Such a one never comes to grief.¹² God repeatedly answers his prayers, intervening and changing the course of events. We find this abundantly illustrated in the life of Swami Shivananda, as in the lives of other God-men. Time and again the Swami's prayers resulted in the miraculous removal of difficulties.

Ever since the establishment of the monastery at Bhuvanewar, Swami Brahmananda had had a keen desire to celebrate there the worship of Mother Durga in the image, and had hoped that this would materialize by the spring of 1922. Then suddenly he had to rush on business to Calcutta where he fell ill and shortly passed away. In deference to his dearly-cherished wish, the monks at Bhuvanewar resolved to celebrate the Mother's worship a year later in the spring. Elaborate preparations were under way, and Mahapurush was invited to come and bless them on this occasion. Most gladly he came accompanied by forty monks and novices. A large number of devotees from Calcutta and elsewhere also availed themselves of this opportunity to visit Bhuvanewar and to participate in the celebration. The worship, lasting as usual for three days, was beautiful in every way. Bhajan, recitation of sacred texts, and feasting were the regular

¹² lx, 22

features of the daily programme in addition to the worship. Meticulous attention was paid to every detail of the programme, and everything was done in a manner that would have pleased Swami Brahmananda, had he been living in the flesh. A small temple which forms a part of the monastery building, completed some time previously, was dedicated with appropriate ceremony on this occasion. On each day of the celebration several thousand people, rich and poor, congregated in the spacious grounds and took part in the festivities. Mahapurush stayed at Bhuvanewar for over a month and enjoyed every minute of his stay. Many times he declared that he felt at the monastery the vivid presence of the Lord and also that of Swami Brahmananda, its guiding spirit and founder. Afterwards he and his party returned to Belur.

Swami Vivekananda, the foremost and the most beloved monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, the leader of his Order and the first bearer of his message, had died long before, in July, 1902. We have incidentally referred to his death in a previous chapter while narrating the story of Swami Shivananda's founding of the monastery at Benares. Swamiji died young and in harness, working very hard at trying to organize and give shape to the Master's great work. For years the members of the Math and Mission had been endeavouring to build at Belur a memorial temple to mark the spot where Swamiji's earthly remains had been cremated. Swami Brahmananda laid the foundation stone of this temple, and the lowest portion, along with the crypt enshrining the sacred ashes as well as a

marble relief portrait of Swamiji, was completed during his regime.

It was left for Mahapurush to finish the temple—the main floor, tower and all. On the main floor stood the altar, decorated with a stone emblem of the mystic syllable OM, symbolic of God in His personal and impersonal aspects and sacred alike to all sects of Hinduism. No altar could have been more appropriate in a temple dedicated to Swami Vivekananda, who had always been in favour of introducing the worship of OM as a symbol of universality and harmony. Mahapurush performed the dedication of the temple on January 28, 1924, the sixty-second anniversary of the birth of Swamiji. The ceremony was grand and impressive and attended by a huge congregation. The festivities of the day were fittingly concluded by a feast called Daridra Narayana by Swamiji served to a large number of poor people. A further plan which materialized much later, was to establish at Belur a college in memory of Swamiji—a temple of learning, having for its prime aim man-making education and promotion of the studies of Sanskrit literature along with Hindu philosophy, religion and culture. The result was the Vidyamandira at Belur—a residential educational institution which has since been doing, in its own way, splendid work for the uplift of India.

During Swami Shivananda's regime the activities of the Math and Mission expanded considerably. Many new centres, small and large, were opened in foreign countries as well as in India. Abroad, work was commenced in France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Argentina and Singapore. The North

American work, which had been initiated by Swami Vivekananda, developed substantially; several additional centres were organized, accompanied by signs of increasing demands for the teaching of Vedanta. Quite a number of centres were established in East and West Bengal, and there were prospects for many more. Ashramas were set up in Bombay, Nagpur, Rajkot and Delhi. In Southern India centres were founded at Ootacamund, Mysore, Trichur, Conjeevaram and Coimbatore. Most of these, both at home and abroad, owed a great deal to Mahapurush for their inception and growth.

After becoming the president of the Order, the Swami toured South India more than once, as he had done several times before. There seemed to be great interest and enthusiasm in that part of the country, calling for the personal presence of the president. It was in April, 1924, that Mahapurush again left Belur for Madras. Swami Sharvananda, the head of the Madras math, Swami Bodhananda, head of the Vedanta Society of New York, then on leave in India, together with several other monks accompanied him. Mahapurush and his party broke their journey at Bhuvanewar and again at Waltair, staying in each place for a few days. The devotees of Waltair received the president right royally, according him the honour and attention he deserved, and accommodated him in a beautiful home situated on the sea. A meeting was organized to present Mahapurush to the Waltair public. In a few appropriate words the Swami thanked the organizers for their efforts and graciously and abundantly blessed the assembled congregation. He then asked

Swami Sharvananda to address the meeting. Swami Sharvananda delivered a stirring and impressive lecture on "The Message of this Age", bringing out the special features of this message and the unique contribution of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Bodhananda spoke on the following day, the subject of his lecture being: "The Eternal Religion." He spoke quite feelingly, and the audience appreciated his earnestness and sincerity. The presence in Waltair of a man of God of the type of Mahapurush evoked great spiritual fervour. Every day, morning and evening, many spiritually-minded men and women would come and see the head of the Order, paying him their worshipful respects. The Swami was very glad to talk to them and help them, bringing comfort and peace to all.

About eleven miles from the city of Waltair there is an ancient temple built on the top of a solitary hill, commanding a sweeping view of the surrounding country. The temple, dedicated to God in His aspect of Narasimha, attracts every year, during certain seasons, hundreds of pilgrims from far and near. Mahapurush expressed a wish to visit this temple, and arrangements were made for the trip, the climb from the foot of the hill to the top being rather steep and difficult. Because of a cyclone in the previous year, the road along with the many flights of steps leading to the summit had been damaged badly, making the climb all the more precarious. Mahapurush was carried by bearers on a sedan chair; the rest of the party, young and strong, trudged along on foot. The Swami, quite impressed by the spiritual atmosphere of the temple,

performed his worship and meditation to his heart's content. Later he remarked to some devotees: "I felt the vivid presence of the Lord there—saw Him standing in his divine majesty."¹³ The priests officiating at worship were extremely cordial to Mahapurush and his party, helping them in every way and entertaining them.

After four days' sojourn in Waltair, Mahapurush and the monks with him were on their way, bound for Madras, and finally they arrived there. That was perhaps the Swami's third visit to Madras, but his first as president. It is needless to add that the monks and devotees of Madras spared no pains to make the Swami comfortable, showing him the honour due to his great office and personality. During his stay a large number of devotees came to see the Swami and he talked to them patiently on God and spiritual problems. All classes of people, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, sought his darshan and blessing. One young man, belonging to a princely family of South India, was so impressed by the Swami's saintly presence and talks that one day he prostrated himself before him, begging for initiation. The Swami, of course, accepted him as a disciple. Several others also were initiated and blessed.

While in Madras the Swami was often invited to dinners, and wherever he went there was festivity and fervour. One day Mahapurush and several others from the monastery were the guests of honour of a very well-to-do devotee. The latter

¹³ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

prepared a sumptuous dinner and did everything possible to show his love and respect for the holy men. After the meal the Swami and those who were with him were seated in the living room; interesting religious conversations were going on to the enjoyment of all concerned. After a while all in the room were startled by the noise of a scuffle going on outside. The Swami stood up, stepped to the window and looked out. He was shocked beyond words at what he saw. Several half-starved men and women, having nothing but rags to cover their bodies, were begging and scrambling for food in the alley. The anguish that the Swami felt in his heart at the sight can well be imagined. Sad and sombre, he turned to his host and said: "Do give these poor people some food. Let them have a hearty meal. Ah! We had ours. Why should they go without food?"¹⁴ Later on he made this remark: "There is no hope for India until she makes amends for this sin—the ill-treatment of her masses. That is why Swamiji reiterated the precept: 'Make the poor of humanity your God. The service of the living God in His form of the destitute is the religion of this age.'¹⁵

While in Madras Mahapurush one day had a sudden illness, a fever with high temperature. At first he took it lightly, refusing to have any treatment or medication, but as the temperature would not come down and other symptoms continued, he was compelled to take to bed. A doctor was sent for and blood tests proved that the Swami had a

¹⁴⁻¹⁵ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

bad malarial infection. After proper treatment and care, in a few days he got well, but the sickness left him very weak. It was decided that he should go to a healthy place for a change in order to recuperate. Springfield, near Coonoor, was chosen—a hill station in the Nilgiri mountain ranges with a cooler and more bracing climate. Located at an elevation of six thousand feet above sea level, with dark patches of eucalyptus and other evergreen forests, and with a sprinkling of picturesque bungalows here and there, Springfield is a very beautiful place. On the adjoining hillsides one can see the terraced tea and coffee plantations and the many winding motor roads going up and down in different directions. Here in Springfield and the neighbouring towns some of India's ruling princes and well-to-do European merchants have their pretentious summer residences. In May, 1924, Mahapurush arrived here accompanied by some monks. He occupied an attractive cottage, set in a spacious garden laid out with shrubs and flowering plants, having all the privacy one could desire. Naturally, he was very happy, enjoying the silence, sunshine and fresh air of the place, and his freedom of movement. In a few days he felt strong again, regaining his previous health and resuming his old familiar pattern of life.

Although the Nilgiris are not very far from Madras, that was perhaps the first time that a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna had come to that part of the country. Very soon the news spread far and wide and brought to Springfield many a devotee and seeker from Coonoor, Ootacamund and even

Malabar, all eager to see the venerable head of the Order and avail themselves of his holy company. Even the simple-minded villagers of the neighbourhood flocked to the cottage where Mahapurush was living, wishing for his darshan and blessing. It goes without saying that the Swami was unsparing in his labours of love and ministration. Quite a few visitors were initiated. When alone in his room or in the garden, he was wont to be in deep mystical moods, enjoying the bliss of union with God. He seemed to be profoundly affected by the spiritual atmosphere of the Nilgiris. Occasionally, if the spirit moved him, he would recount some of his inner experiences and share them with others, but as a rule he preferred to maintain silence.

Once in the course of conversation Mahapurush expressed the thought that it would be an excellent thing if an ashrama were established in this area. Many monks of the Order could then come and live here, being benefited thereby. The wish of a holy man, expressed or unexpressed, is a force that is contagious and carries with it its power of fulfilment. The moment the devotees at Coonoor and Ootacamund came to know of this wish, they became very enthusiastic and thought of ways and means. Two emissaries were deputed in search of land where the ashrama might be established. Through the grace of God, in an unforeseen manner, the way opened up. The Swami writes about it in a letter: "Mysterious is the power of the Lord! A devotee here has offered to give a two-acre piece of property for the ashrama, and it has come about in this way. In a dream the Chosen



Ootacamund
1926



Deity of this devotee appeared to him and said: 'Very soon some people will come to you for a piece of land for a monastery. Be sure to give them what they want.' This vision recurred three nights successively.¹⁶ The joy and surprise of the emissaries looking for the land knew no bounds when they happened to meet this devotee with his gratuitous offer. Detailed plans were then made so that the ashrama could be established soon.

The members of the Ramakrishna Hermitage in Ootacamund, an institution in sympathy with the Order, convened at the local Anjuman Hall a public meeting presided over by the distinguished lawyer B. Rama Rao. Swami Shivananda was invited to bless the meeting by his presence. Addresses of welcome were presented to him by different groups, and with his approval and the consent of everybody present an ashrama committee was formed. In his reply Mahapurush first graciously thanked the donor of the property, paying special tribute to his generosity, and then he thanked the organizers of the meeting for their kind efforts. At the request of Mahapurush, Swami Srivasananda, a monk of the Order, addressed the meeting, outlining in his speech the Mission's ideals and activities.

The property donated is in Bishopdown, an attractive suburb of Ootacamund. Ideally located at a high altitude, on the top of a hill, away from the noise, dust and bustle of the cities of the plains, it has all the characteristic features of a hermitage—

¹⁶ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

silence, privacy, scenic beauty and bracing climate. It overlooks to the south the picturesque valley known as Lawrence Asylum, to the north the race-tracks of Ootacamund. About the place the Swami writes: "It is a beautiful mountain, cool and refreshing, about eight thousand feet above sea-level. The house we have received is very secluded, neat and tidy and well furnished. It has around it a garden with many shrubs and trees, the majority of which are eucalyptus trees. The grounds are quite large. The climate of the place is very good."¹⁷ On July 11, an auspicious day, after appropriate worship, Mahapurush laid the foundation stone of the ashrama, in a ceremony attended by a large number of people. As the place was not yet quite ready for use, the Swami stayed at the house in Springfield where he had been. During his brief sojourn of about two months in Springfield, Mahapurush was invited by different groups of Coonoor and Ootacamund, and he spoke to small and large audiences, interesting many in the teaching of Vedanta as taught by Sri Ramakrishna.

Two years later the Swami came back to the Nilgiri mountains and performed the dedication ceremony of the ashrama at Ootacamund, now ready for use. There he stayed for quite a while. We shall now try to paint a picture of the Swami's life there at this time—a life typical of the man of God he had always been. While staying at the ashrama in Ootacamund, morning and evening, the Swami used to go out for walks, carrying with him

¹⁷ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

some money and sweets. On the way he would distribute these among the hill children whom he met. Freely he would mix and talk with them as if he were one of them. Most of the time at home when nobody was present he would be in deep spiritual moods. One day, finding him seated like this, the attendant inquired; "Maharaj, are you well?" The question did not seem to have reached the Swami's ears at all, so absorbed was he in his own thought.

After a while the Swami said:

"This place has such a marvellous spiritual vibration that the mind spontaneously wants to plunge into the Infinite. I did not realize this before. With the passing of days I am surprised at the unusual experiences coming to me and I think of the grace of the Master. It seems that he has brought me here in order to bestow upon me the rare joy of these divine perceptions.

"Many years ago when I was in the Himalayas I had similar experiences. Here the natural tendency of my mind is towards meditation; it becomes calm and steady without any effort. Sometimes I have to exert myself in order to bring my mind down. In days of yore many saints and sages must have practised great austerities and meditations here. That is why the place has such a deep spiritual atmosphere, so helpful to meditation. The other day C and others mentioned that the forests in this region abound in many kinds of fruits. It is quite probable that the ancient saints and sages practising meditation here lived on these fruits."¹⁸

After remaining quiet for a while the Swami continued: "The other day as I sat here silently

¹⁸ *Shivananda Vani*, 1

watching the blue mountain ranges I experienced something. I saw a luminous figure coming out of this body (meaning his own), and it grew and grew, till at last it enveloped the whole world."¹⁹ Heaving a deep sigh he then remarked: "The Lord God is the Soul of my soul. It is He who pervades the stupendous universe. 'Only a portion of His power spreads over the different worlds; the rest is transcendant, immortal.'"²⁰ Fascinated by the recital of these experiences, the attendant reverently asked: "Maharaj, shall we not experience these things ourselves? We do not seem to notice any difference in the vibration of the place."

The Swami replied:

"You see, my child, God alone can give you these experiences. Hold on to Him, cry and pray to Him. Whatever is necessary He will do at the proper time. He alone is the Lord of the mind—the Supreme Spirit. If He graciously turns inward the mind,—which is otherwise so turbulent, like a mad elephant, this mind becomes calm and absorbed in samadhi, reaching a state beyond all modifications. Unless the mind becomes subtle and fine, one cannot have spiritual experiences. Can the mind become placid in a day? How much spiritual discipline is necessary for it? When the mind becomes highly refined and moves in a lofty plane, then alone spiritual perceptions of a higher order are possible. When the mind becomes pure, it vibrates and reacts to spiritual things. The higher the mind ascends the more it reflects spiritual ideas. The essence of everything is love and devotion at His feet. If one has that, one has accomplished all."²¹

^{19,21} *Shivananda Vani*, 11

During his stay at the ashrama in Ootacamund Mahapurush met several sincere adherents of alien faiths who came to him for spiritual help. We shall mention here one particular incident that is very interesting and significant. About it the Swami said later to the monks at Belur:

“One year I visited the Nilgiri hills. Learning that I was there, a Mohammedan doctor and his family came all the way from Bombay to see me. After inquiry I found that he was a famous physician of Bombay, who had been educated in England and had a very good practice. He was accompanied by his wife and two sons, who were very handsome in appearance.

“In the course of conversation the doctor said to me, “We have come to see you, but my wife is particularly eager to speak to you.’ Saying this, he moved to the adjoining room. His wife saluted me with great devotion, and disclosed many intimate things relative to her spiritual life. Since childhood she has been a devotee of Sri Krishna. She worships the Child Krishna and occasionally has visions of him. After reading the Master’s life and teachings she has become very much devoted to him. It is her conviction that her Chosen Deity, Sri Krishna, has been born again as Sri Ramakrishna.

“I noticed that she had profound love and devotion for the Master. She is quite intense in her spiritual practices, and the Master has blessed her in many ways. When taking leave of me, she knelt down and bowed to me, saying, ‘Please bless me by touching my head with your hand. You had the blessed privilege of associating with Sri Ramakrishna, and you were blessed by him. Please touch my head with the hand that once touched Sri Ramakrishna.’ And how she

wept! I said to myself again and again: 'Glory be unto the Lord! Blessed is Thy power.'"²²

In the latter part of July, 1924, Mahapurush and his party were on their way to Bangalore in Mysore, after a very fruitful, though brief, visit in the Nilgiris. Within so short a time how much had been accomplished with seeds sown for further activities which were to sprout and grow later! On the way the Swami stopped for about a week at the pretty little ashrama in Nattrampalli, a fair-sized village. The reception and honour accorded to the president here were exceptional and touching. Every day scores of simple villagers would come to the ashrama, loaded with flowers, fruits, sweets or anything that they could obtain and offer them to the Swami as tokens of their humble homage. Naturally, Mahapurush was very much moved by the earnestness and sincerity of the people. As the Swami could not speak or understand their dialect, and as they likewise could not speak or understand either the Swami's mother tongue or English, the communication had to be through silence, the language of the heart. Yet there seemed to be a perfect exchange of thought and feeling. At dusk, the vesper time, the ashrama grounds were filled to capacity; so many devotees gathered to participate in the evening service and receive the blessing of the head of the Order at parting! At Nattrampalli also quite a number were initiated.

On the eve of the Swami's departure from

²² *Shivananda Vani, I*



At Nattrampalli
1924

Springfield, because of heavy rain in the mountains, the river Cauvery overflowed its banks, flooding vast areas. It was one of the worst floods to visit that part of the country. Thousands were rendered homeless and the loss of stock and property was immense. One can imagine Mahapurushji's distress as he read in the newspapers the reports of the disaster. The monastery in Madras lost no time in organizing relief work to mitigate the sufferings of the people, freely distributing to all, food, clothes, medicines and other necessary things, and this pleased Mahapurush immensely. That was the first relief work undertaken by the Mission in the Nilgiris, and the work was so well managed that it added to the good name and prestige of the Order.

Mahapurush finally arrived in Bangalore and stayed at the ashrama for several months. Here he seemed to be very happy and in very good health, while following practically the same intense routine. In Bangalore the Swami met many sincere and earnest young men who often visited the monastery. By his saintly life and spirited talks he influenced their lives to such an extent that some of them resolved to renounce their family ties and join the Order, dedicating themselves to its great work.

For some years the ashrama in Bangalore has been conducting a home for students studying in local educational institutions. The boys living there are under the paternal care and supervision of the monks of the Order and have in this way the advantage of growing up and building their lives in

a very wholesome, spiritual atmosphere. During Mahapurushji's presence in Bangalore at this time, these boys sometimes came to the monastery and sat at the Swami's feet, listening to his spiritual talks. Occasionally also the Swami would visit them in their dormitories or watch them play in the open grounds in front of the ashrama. One afternoon some of the boys were playing at hockey, and Mahapurush was having his usual daily promenade on the path bordering the playgrounds. He was absorbed in his own thoughts as he was walking up and down. It so happened that one boy, madly running after the hockey ball, came to the spot where the Swami was and, instead of hitting the ball as he wanted to do, inadvertently struck hard with the stick at the Swami's foot. It was a stunning blow causing excruciating pain, and the Swami was about to faint. He somehow managed to stand there for a minute leaning upon his cane until someone nearby helped him to his quarters. He was confined to his room for several days before he recovered.

Of course, the boy responsible for this accident felt very much ashamed and would not come near the monastery, avoiding the Swami. The latter sensing the boy's chagrin sent for him and put him at ease, making light of the accident. Later, whenever he met the boy he would talk with him graciously and joke with him. Although it was a simple incident, it illustrates the Swami's understanding heart.

In the State of Mysore and some other parts of South India there lived in those days men and

women who belonged to communities of depressed or submerged classes. Deprived of certain opportunities and privileges which are enjoyed by other Hindus, they lived in a deplorable condition characterized by extreme poverty, illiteracy, dirt and squalor. They were segregated from the rest of the Hindus, being denied access to orthodox homes, temples, wells and other places. It is a condition for which there is no justification in any scripture or book of ethics, and Hindu society should be ashamed of it. Enlightened public opinion, far from sanctioning it, had always condemned it. Not far from the monastery in Bangalore was such a small depressed community. Curious about it, Mahapurush one morning decided to walk to this little village, and several monks were with him. It was a procedure which no secular orthodox Hindu would think of doing, and as such it created a sensation. In their surprise these poor people rushed to see the Swami and pay their respects to him, but only from a distance. Mahapurush entered the humble little temple used by these people and remained absorbed for a while in meditation. Later he remarked: "Ah! They have great devotion. They worship the Deity with real earnestness."²³ Through an interpreter he learned at first hand the sad story of their hard struggle for existence and of the many indignities they had to bear. He was very much pained to see human beings living in such a condition. He comforted them and advised them to keep their homes, and especially their temple, very clean,

²³ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

while performing the worship properly. Several times later the Swami visited this community, carrying with him some money and sweets which he gave freely to the half-starved, naked children whom he met there. At the time of his departure from Bangalore some of these children came to see him, bidding him good-bye with tears in their eyes. It was a touching scene. Fortunately for India, very recently under the new National Government this form of social injustice has been legally prohibited; men and women of all classes, poor or rich, are free to enter all public places.

In December, 1924, Mahapurush returned to Madras and performed the dedication of the newly constructed high school premises attached to the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home. Subsequently, after thus spending more than six busy months in different parts of South India, Mahapurush in January of the following year left for Bombay, where his presence was badly needed. On the way he stopped for a few days at Cuddapah, a town of some importance, in response to an invitation from a group of devotees. About this visit the Swami said later:

“A Mohammedan whom I met in Cuddapah is so highly esteemed that he received the title of Khan Bahadur from the British Government. He belongs to the Sufi sect of Islam, but is very devoted to the Master. In Cuddapah is a little ashrama dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna. The Khan Bahadur, the local collector who is also a Mohammedan, and several others were responsible for the founding of the ashrama. We stayed there for a few days. Almost every

morning and evening I found the Khan Bahadur seated in a corner of the shrine room in deep humility, intently looking at the portrait of the Master on the altar. He is convinced that the Prophet Mohammed was born as Sri Ramakrishna for the good of the world.”²⁴

In the second week of January, 1925, Mahapurush and his party finally arrived in Bombay. He was given a tremendous ovation by a large gathering at the Victoria Terminus Railway Station and then taken to the Ramakrishna Ashrama in Khar, a suburb of Bombay. The ashrama, begun some time previously by Swami Sharvananda with the help of local devotees, had been operating from rented quarters at Khar Road. Soon after his arrival Mahapurush resolved to put the ashrama on a permanent footing, and he urged the devotees to get busy. It was not long before a piece of land was purchased, the lot forming a part of the new development tract of Khar, which when completed would be an ideal residential suburb of Bombay. On an auspicious day the foundation stone of the ashrama was laid on the land by Mahapurush.

As a first step towards the consolidation of the activities of the Order, Swami Vivekananda had decided to establish four monasteries at the four strategic spots of India, namely, the Himalayas, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Swamiji had succeeded in establishing the first three of these during his lifetime, but it was left for Mahapurush to found the last, the one in Bombay. It made him very happy to think that at last Swamiji's wish was

²⁴ *Shivananda Vani*, 1

fulfilled and that he had been made the instrument. Instinctively he felt confident about the future of this ashrama. He once said: "In times to come the Lord's work here will have splended success. He is managing His work; we are simply instruments."²⁵ Mahapurush stayed at this time in Bombay for over a month. Every day he met a large number of seekers of Truth who came from the many suburbs of Bombay and from the city itself. Patiently and with great solicitude he talked to them on spiritual matters and helped them, thus influencing their lives. Many received initiation from him. He was presented with addresses of welcome by different groups in the city. Unfortunately, he had to hurry back to Belur to attend to certain important organizational matters at the headquarters. He made the trip via Nagpur, arriving at the math just before the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna.

The construction work on the ashrama at Khar progressed and was completed in about two years. Mahapurush was invited again to come and perform the dedication to which he readily agreed. On the 26th of December, 1926, the Swami dedicated the ashrama, installing Sri Ramakrishna's picture in the shrine room. The ceremony, consisting of worship, prayers, devotional music, feasting and lectures, was quite imposing, and was attended by a large number of distinguished and representative citizens of Bombay. It was indeed an important event in the annals of the Mission's activities in

²⁵ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

Western India. At this time he also laid the foundation stone of a free clinic and dispensary and an elementary school soon to be established for the benefit of the people of the locality. The ashrama in Bombay, which in recent years has grown tremendously, owes a great deal to Swami Shivananda. His visits and spiritual influence gave it a great forward impetus. The Swami enjoyed his visits to Bombay very much and lived there a rather busy life, interviewing people and guiding them in their spiritual pursuits. There were devotional singing and discussions at the ashrama almost every day. If the weather permitted, he would go on long walks for relaxation, accompanied by some monks. The Juhu beach, not far from the monastery, was a favourite place with him. Sometimes on the way he visited the Shiva temple founded by the fishermen of Juhu, who reverently greeted the Swami, addressing him as "Father". They talked to him about their problems and troubles in life, and the Swami always treated these simple people as genuine friends.

We have mentined that Mahapurush on his way from Bombay to Belur stopped at Nagpur in the Central Province; that was in February, 1925. In those days there was no ashrama in Nagpur. A small group of devotees, deeply interested in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, used to meet occasionally, pursuing reading, discussion and meditation together in some home; this was the nucleus of the future ashrama. Mahapurush stayed here for about a week, his visit serving as a great incentive to the work. At this

time he laid the foundation stone of the ashrama on a piece of land already obtained at Craddock Town, a section of Nagpur. Gradually as funds came in, buildings were constructed and the work also was expanded. On his second visit, two years later, Mahapurush performed the dedication ceremony of the ashrama. In recent years the ashrama in Nagpur has become one of the most progressive centres of the Order, with many types of activities, including free clinic and dispensary, library, students' home, publication and preaching. The success of these was due in a large measure to Mahapurushji's visits and the efforts of Swami Sharvananda.

After nearly a year's travel and absence from the headquarters, passed in South India and Bombay, Mahapurush at last returned to Belur in February, 1925. It had been a very effective and fruitful experience. During this period, wherever he went he tried his best to consolidate the activities of the many ashramas and monasteries that he visited, just as he established new centres with promise of expansion. Everywhere by his quiet, godly life and inspiring presence he succeeded in creating new interests among people, instilling in their minds the universal teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, and his ideals of renunciation and service, in addition to giving increased impetus to the lives of those who were already on the path. His visits and talks were also responsible for many new monastic recruits to the Order. Whatever success he attained and whatever appreciation he received, he laid no claim to it, but rather gave all the credit to the Lord.



Belur Math
1925

CHAPTER VII

THE WORK DEAR TO HIS HEART

IN the previous chapter we have seen Mahapurush visiting places, attending meetings and celebrations, dedicating temples and institutions and performing public functions. This does not mean that in the rush and preoccupation of his great office he neglected to watch the inner growth of individual monks and devotees and to help them; that was the work which had always been very dear to his heart. As a man of God, living in God, Mahapurush knew very well that it is the life and character of the individual monks and devotees—their sense of values, their spirit of self-sacrifice and service, their sincerity, purity and devotion, and their spiritual attainments—that constitute the true well-being and progress of the Order. Wherever he happened to be, whether at Belur or elsewhere, he would see to it that the monks and devotees did not miss the real issue and objective of life—the vision of God. He always stressed to all that they paid particular attention to the details of daily life—to spiritual practice, meditation and devotions, as well as to works of service, doing everything in the right spirit. He was wont to say that it is not the kind or quantity of work which one does that counts; it is the spirit in which it is done that is important. It is not outward pomp or glory that will ultimately help one towards the realization of God; it is righteous living. Above every-

thing else, he invariably drove home to all the supreme need of whole-souled loyalty to Sri Ramakrishna and the Order.

For instance, Mahapurush wrote to a monk: "You said that you would be out collecting funds for the ashrama in August. Wherever you go, never neglect your japa and meditation; you must do that by all means."¹ He advised another: "Have a fixed time for your spiritual practice, for that is the source of all strength and power. It will not do if you belittle it, devoting less time to it."² In answer to an inquiry again, he said: "Spiritual practice is a bounden duty, something of prime importance. It was stressed in the past and it will be so in future, as it should be now. The works of service as taught by Sri Ramakrishna can never be done properly without regular meditation and spiritual exercise. Work and worship must be carried on together—that is the golden mean."³

Sometimes monks while engaged in works of service would have the wrong notion that they were wasting their time in useless activity, missing the vision of God, which they thought should come only through exclusive spiritual practice. Mahapurush used to set them right, explaining the true meaning and purpose of work. He wrote to one: "May the Lord give you indomitable enthusiasm and courage! Know it for certain that the ashrama is bound to flourish. Don't worry on that score. Never forget what Swamiji said regarding work. Whatever you do in connection with the monastery

¹⁻³ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

or in the way of service to the country is not something inferior to spiritual practice. All that you do is His work—even as japa and meditation are. Never doubt this. Even as repeating His name and thinking about Him is spiritual practice, so is the service of man when done selflessly. You are wholly mistaken, nay irrational, if you think that you have wasted your life in doing service. Spiritual practice is not of one kind only; it is various. It is renunciation of the ego or the self.”⁴

In a group where many live and work together there is bound to be a certain amount of friction and misunderstanding, human nature being what it is. There is temperamental difference in addition to lack of patience and understanding. It happens everywhere—in family life as well as in the lives of communities and associations. Monasteries and convents are no exceptions. At Belur and other centres Mahapurush was faced with such problems, and he tried to solve them in his own saintly way, appealing to the Divine in man. Once he said: “Look here, the Master used to say that one should see the ocean in the drop of water. It was not just a superficial opinion of his; it was a conviction—the outcome of his actual experience; otherwise we could not have stayed with him. Instead of seeing our faults, he graciously attracted us to his side and let us live with him as we were. Who is there that is absolutely stainless? All those who have come here have one aim, and that is to be free from imperfection. Nobody came here perfect. These minor weaknesses will even-

⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

tually disappear through His grace. If one can be resigned at His feet, He will set everything right.”⁵ At times, some of the monks would commit grievous blunders, and there were persistent suggestions for correction through severe scoldings and punishments. To such suggestions Mahapurush would say: “You cannot reform people by simply talking and reprimanding. If you have the spiritual power, redirect and change the inner tendencies of people. Talk to the Lord and pray to Him so that He may do the work of reforming. If He is gracious, then in a trice tendencies will undergo wholesale transformation.”⁶ Mahapurush always had great faith in the monks who had joined the Order and dedicated themselves to the Lord’s work, as is indicated by the following remarks: “Those who have resigned themselves at the feet of the Lord have nothing to worry about. He will certainly take care of them, gathering them in His arms, if not in this life, at least at the dying moment. Of course, as long as they live in the flesh they have to do their allotted works. The salvation of His devotees is assured.”⁷ “You are our descendents. It is you who will manage things from now on. How long shall we live? Take charge of the activities of the Order. It is your turn.”⁸ “Truth will triumph in the long run. Nobody can hurt the Order built by Sri Ramakrishna, who embodied Truth. Know this for certain: loyalty to the Order is synonymous with loyalty to him.”⁹ “I am so glad that all of you are here. I feel that the Master is taking this opportunity to awaken the spiritual

⁵⁻⁹ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

sense—the conscience of the Order—by giving it a good shake. He is also clearly indicating that his great work cannot be managed by any one individual; it is a group responsibility, needing the combined efforts of all members. With the active co-operation of everyone the Order will go on smoothly and well. The many trials and tribulations it may have will rouse all the more its inherent strength and power. In all noble undertakings there are so many hurdles to overcome! We too will have ours and they will intensify our faith, devotion and reliance upon the Lord. The Order of Sri Ramakrishna came into being for a definite purpose—the propagation of his gospel, the universal teachings of Vedanta—and the Master is working through every unit of this organization. It will function and do its work of ministration unimpeded for centuries. Nobody can stop its power. This is what our omniscient seer, Swamiji, said, my boys.”¹⁰

In the winter of the next year, January, 1926, Mahapurush was away again for a while. This time he went to Deoghar in Bihar, to dedicate the new premises of the Sri Ramakrishna Vidyapith, a residential high school for boys, managed by the Mission. A large number of monks and devotees from the headquarters accompanied him, and quite a number came from Benares, Patna and Jamtara to participate in the dedication. It was an impressive function, and the school moved from the old quarters to the new spacious buildings with large grounds. Mahapurush and his party stayed at Deoghar for over three weeks. In those days the

¹⁰ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

Swami enjoyed very good health and was in excellent spirits. He rose early in the morning and with the enthusiasm of a young man walked up and down the grounds of the school, absorbed in his own thoughts. Regarding the future of the Vidyapith he often said: "Eventually this school will grow immensely. I see clearly that many big things will be done here." Yet at that time the institution had only just begun.

Deoghar is a holy place with its famous temple dedicated to the Lord Shiva. Every winter thousands of men and women from different parts of India go there to attend a religious festival and fair held in honour of Shiva. Most of them travel all the way on foot. They carry on their heads Ganga water in vessels, or fruits and sweets in baskets, all of which are to be offered to the Lord, and they sing and dance in ecstasy as they walk along. It is a sight for the gods to behold. When Swami Shivananda admiringly watched this pageant going by the school grounds, he would pass into an exalted mood, filled with the thought of the Great God, Shiva. Sometimes he conversed with the pilgrims or joined in their singing.

Once during his brief stay in Deoghar, Mahapurush had a chill which developed into a very bad cold accompanied by painful asthmatic spells. He spent a sleepless night. Next morning, though still suffering from the after-effects, he greeted everyone with his usual cheerfulness. To an inquiring monk he thus described his condition:

I suffered a great deal last night. I felt almost suffocated. The passages of my nose be-

came stopped up because of my cold, and the asthma was very much worse. I did not feel at ease whether sitting, reclining or lying down. I surrounded myself with pillows, as you find me now, and leaned my head against them. Even that did not relieve my suffering. Gradually, I felt as if all my senses would stop and my life would leave the body. Being at a loss what to do I started meditating. It being the meditation of an old man (that is to say, one with many years' experience in meditation), my consciousness soon became absorbed within: I noticed then that there was no pain or suffering and the mind became quiet and placid. The storm and stress of the outer world could not penetrate there. After remaining in that state a while, my mind came down to the external world." ¹¹

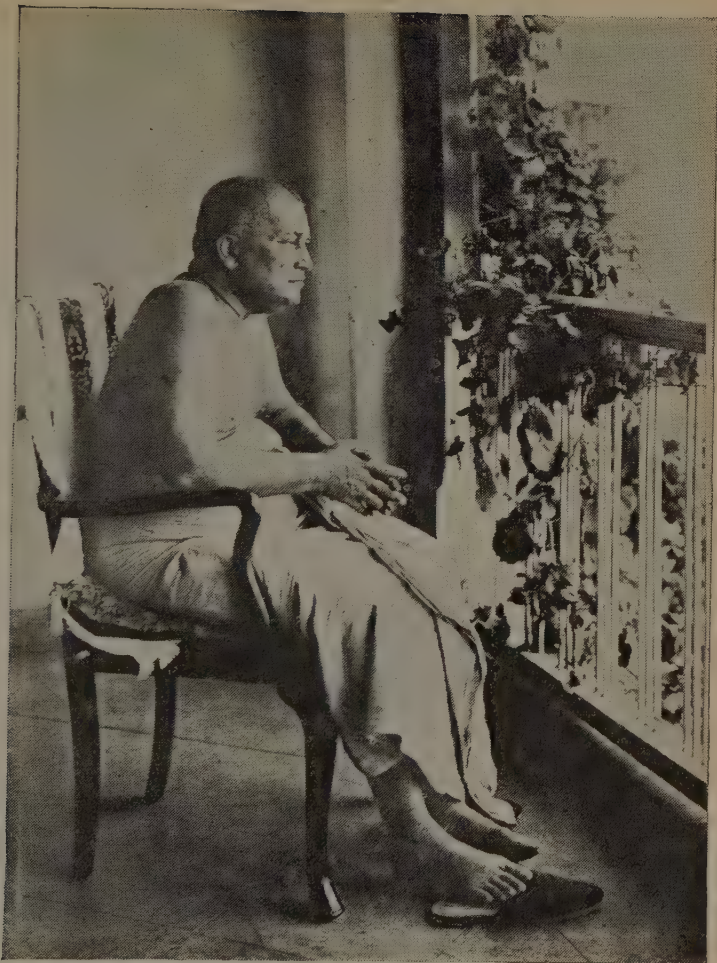
On his way back to Belur from Deoghar, Mahapurush stopped at Jamtara in Bihar and dedicated the new temple of the ashrama there. While at Jamtara he was one day meditating in his own room when suddenly he exclaimed three times, "Great good has happened in this wilderness!" Everyone rejoiced, for apparently the Swami, in his meditation, had foreseen the immense possibilities of the centre at Jamtara, a pretty little town with a very good climate. Mahapurush felt that this ashrama would serve as an ideal retreat for the monks of the Order. They could come and live here a typical monastic life, devoting their energies to spiritual practice along the old orthodox patterns, avoiding the paraphernalia of an expensive establishment, doing everything themselves. The food which they would get by the time-honoured method

¹¹ *Shivananda Vani*, 1

of begging from the town they would first offer to the Lord and then eat, and they would be satisfied with simple things. The ashrama also would serve the useful purpose of a convalescent home for sick monks. The Swami seemed very happy with the monks and devotees of the locality. Occasionally a number of Santhals, very simple men and women of a backward race, would come to present him with gifts, and they would sometimes dance for his entertainment. One day the Swami gave a feast to a large number of these poor Santhals; he was in ecstasy as he saw them enjoying their meals. Then he said, "Ah! They are the veritable manifestations of the Lord." After spending four happy days at the ashrama in Jamtara, the Swami and his party left for Belur.

In April, 1926, the first convention of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission was held at the monastery at Belur. It was an outstanding event in the annals of the Order, bringing together monks, workers and devotees from the many centres throughout India. Even as in ancient days the followers of Buddha congregated a number of times after his death to discuss his philosophy and religion, so the monastic and lay followers of Sri Ramakrishna met at this time to discuss the ideas and ideals for which the Master had stood and to find ways and means by which his mission could best be fulfilled. Swami Shivananda presided over their deliberations and gave a remarkable address, parts of which are here quoted:

"Children of Sri Ramakrishna, please allow me to express my sincere felicitations at your con-



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gregating together in this Convention of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission held for the first time in the annals of the Ramakrishna Order....

“From my little experience I tell you, children of Sri Ramakrishna, that our organization lasts as long as the spirit of God pervades its atmosphere. Love, catholicity, purity and selflessness are the cornerstones of our organization. No man-made laws can save it from ruin when selfishness eats into its vitals. If you all try to become perfect, keeping intact your allegiance to this Math, which gives you every kind of facility for reaching perfection, you will add a leaf to the life of the organization. Swamiji shed his blood for the Math. His spirit is still hovering over us. This Math is the visible body of Sri Ramakrishna. All those that have gone before us are still with us in spirit, to help us in all possible ways. We must unfurl all sails so that we may take advantage of the divine wind that is ever blowing to bring us to the destined goal.....

“I have fullest confidence in all of you who have been earnestly endeavouring to realize this lofty ideal in life. You do not hesitate to brush aside any personal considerations, however strong, for the realization of this ideal, and I clearly find Sri Ramakrishna, our Light and Guide, working from behind you and through you. His benign hands are at the back of all of your activities. It is his grace alone that has enabled your works to be crowned with success within such a short period of time. So long as you have faith in him, so long as you consider yourselves humble instruments in his hands, no power on earth, however great, can shake you from your position by so much as a jot or tittle. Putting your faith in our Lord, everyone of you can say, ‘Let me stand where I am and I shall move the world.’ With all the earnestness at my command I exhort you not to be disturbed or discouraged by momentary

failures. Failures are but stepping-stones to success. Viewing success and failure alike, work on with unwavering faith in him, and victory will be yours in the end. I only pray that your surrender may be complete. Be like the arrow that darts from the bow. Be like the hammer that falls on the anvil. Be like the sword that pierces its object. The arrow does not murmur if it misses the target. The hammer does not fret if it falls on a wrong place. And the sword does not lament if it is broken in the hands of its wielder. Yet there is joy in being made, used and broken, and an equal joy in being finally set aside." ¹²

Swami Shivananda had great confidence in both the monks and householder devotees of the Order, and for that matter in all human beings. He maintained this reliance until the last day of his life. There were occasions when some individuals abused his trust in order to serve their own selfish ends, but that did not alter his attitude. This phase of his character is brought out nicely in the concluding paragraph of the passages just quoted from his address.

One of the most important achievements of the convention was the formation of a Working Committee consisting of young Swamis who would stay at the headquarters and manage the several activities of the Math and Mission under the general supervision of the president, the secretary and the Trustees. Since with the passing of days the Order was continuing to expand, becoming possessed of far-flung ramifications, this was certainly a necessary step. The Working Committee lightened the burden resting on the shoulders

¹² The Ramakrishna Math and Mission Convention Report

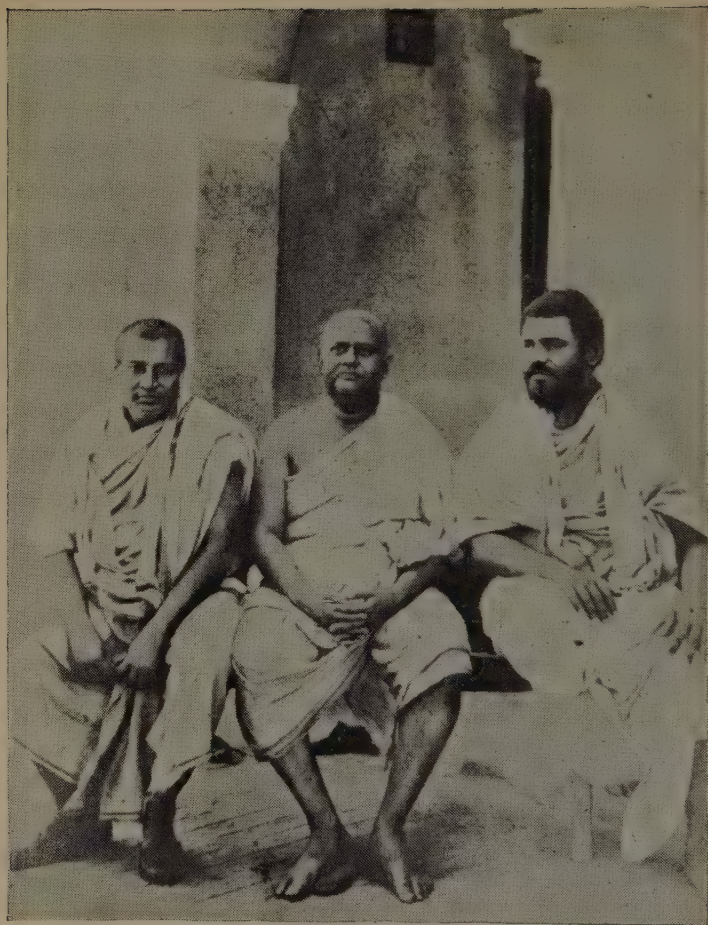
of Swami Shivananda, so that he could henceforth direct his time and energy more fully to his most important work — that of looking after the spiritual well-being of individuals, lay and monastic, and of disseminating the message of Sri Ramakrishna to those who visited the math in ever-increasing numbers.

In June, 1927, a monk who had been a very good worker in the Sri Ramakrishna Vidyapith at Deoghar fell a victim to tuberculosis and came to Belur. The sickness took a serious turn, and doctors gave up all hope of his recovery; the patient himself was full of despair. It was decided that he should be sent to a sanatorium in Madras. He was temporarily accommodated in a room at the clinic attached to the Belur Math. Mahapurush visited him daily, lovingly carrying with him fruits or other things. The Swami talked to him by the hour and tried to cheer him. Finally, moved to the sanatorium in Madras, this sick monk got the best of care and treatment and recovered after several months' stay. This pleased Mahapurush very much. Regarding Mahapurushji's love and compassion this monk once said: "It was not my stay at the Madras sanatorium nor the physician who had treated me, that was responsible for my recovery; it was really Mahapurush Maharaj who healed me and saved my life. I am well again because of his blessings. Every day he stood by my bedside and earnestly said: 'Don't cry, my child! I emphatically say that you will recover. Have faith in my words. The Lord will indeed save your life.' Whenever I saw him I couldn't

restrain my tears; I would cry. He continued his healing words of assurance and encouragement. After listening to him like this I thought within myself: 'The Swami is a direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. So long as he persistently says so, I shall surely get well. How can his words be false?' Words fail to express the deep compassion of the Swami."¹³ Similar incidents could be cited, illustrating the Swami's great feeling heart.

Mahapurush actually saw God in His devotees — such was his exalted angle of vision — a fact corroborated by his following remarkable statement: "Who is the devotee? It is the Lord Himself who in a way becomes embodied as a devotee in order to taste the bliss of His divine sport. That is why the Master used to say: 'The scripture, the devotee and the Lord — they are one and the same,' and he would salute them. The words of the Lord are treasured in the scriptures and He is seated in the hearts of His devotees. How could the world understand His ways if He did not manifest Himself as man among His devotees? He is born as man in order to redeem embodied beings, and even when He gives up the gross body, His power continues through His devotees. Just see how the divine power of Sri Ramakrishna is working even after his death, bringing hundreds of seekers here! Ah! How beautiful is the idea! The Lord Himself is born as His devotee. Although He is omnipresent and infinite, He comes to us in a finite form for our good, and we should never have grasped this truth of the Divine Incarna-

¹³ *Mahapurush Shivananda*



(L. to R.)—Swamis Shivananda, Brahmananda and Saradananda

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1907

tion and His unique grace if we hadn't seen Sri Ramakrishna." ¹⁴

In August, 1927, Swami Saradananda, a direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who had been secretary of the Math and Mission from its inception, passed away. As an ideal karma-yogi, the Swami had most faithfully and efficiently discharged the multifarious duties of his office, serving Sri Ramakrishna and God in man. By his death, the Order lost one of its foremost executives: the devotees, an ideal teacher; and Swami Shivananda, a cherished brother and tireless co-worker. Mahapurush was so overwhelmed with grief at the death of Swami Saradananda that for days he spoke of nothing else. Lovingly he dwelt upon the many noble traits of his character — his endless patience, mother-like love, and profound spirituality.

Concerning Swami Saradananda, Mahapurush once remarked:

"He was indeed a blessed soul. The Holy Mother was very gracious to him; that is why he had such a glorious death... He was a great yogi. Giving up the body in samadhi, he went straight to the Master and the Holy Mother. It does not matter in what way the body dies. The scriptures say it does not in any way affect the inner consciousness of a knower of Brahman, even if he passes out of the body in coma or swoon, or in any other manner. After the first attack of apoplexy, he seemed for some days to have no external consciousness, but inwardly he was fully conscious...

"During the last few years of his life Swami Saradananda was especially given to practising intensive meditation and spiritual discipline. After bathing in the Ganga in the morning, he would sit for meditation and not move from his

¹⁴ Mahapurush Shivananda

seat until one or one thirty in the afternoon. He would have an interval during which, sitting right there in his meditation seat, he would drink a cup of tea.

“He was unusually kind to the devotees. Especially to women devotees he was a haven of peace. A little after four in the afternoon they would start coming, and he would give them advice untiringly until evening. Later, came a crowd of men devotees who stayed far into the night. The door of his compassionate heart was ever open. Ah, what a wonderful life he lived—serene, peaceful, patient and profound. We never saw Swami Saradananda lose his temper; he had only love and compassion for all. Now that he is united with the Master and the Holy Mother, he is enjoying supreme blessedness and from that realm is constantly helping the devotees.”¹⁵

It was immediately following the loss of this great brother disciple that Swami Shivananda's own health began to markedly decline. He once said: “With Sarat Maharaj's (Swami Saradananda's) departure, this body of mine is on its way; it is alive in name only.” Everyone at the math became exceedingly alarmed at his condition.

Thinking that a change of climate might prove efficacious to Mahapurush, a devotee at Madhupur in Bihar urged that he visit him, and the Swami accepted the invitation. He went there accompanied by many devotees, and in a few days his health improved. Then, at the suggestion of friends and devotees, he availed himself of the opportunity of visiting Benares, which is not far from Madhupur.

It was Swami Shivananda's last visit to the city

¹⁵ *Shivananda Vani*, 1

of Shiva, and he remained there for about two months. There, on the auspicious birthday anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, many novices were ordained monks by the Swami. Memorable were those days for the monastics, devotees and workers in general, because of the inspiring presence of Mahapurush. He was in his element and incessantly talked to the eager crowds that gathered, morning and evening, in his room. Occasionally, he shared with them his reminiscences of the olden days of asceticism in Benares. God and spirituality were, of course, the invariable themes of his conversation. Regarding the extraordinary holiness of the city, the Swami remarked: "The entire city of Benares is the body of Shiva. We are living in Shiva."¹⁶ Again he said: "Benares is the great cremation ground. It is not proper for householders to live a worldly life here. Only those who call upon the Lord and take His name should live here."¹⁷

During this period in Benares Mahapurushji gave initiation to as many as fifty men and women. In this city, as Shiva is the presiding Deity and guru, the divine teacher of men, the tradition is that nobody is to give initiation. The Swami's seemingly unorthodox act raised some doubts in the minds of the monks of the ashrama. One day an attendant made bold to say: "Maharaj, I have a question in my mind. Swami Brahmananda and others never initiated anyone here, but you are initiating people. Please solve this question."¹⁸

For a while the Swami kept silent, looking serious. Then he said: "You see, my child, I

^{16,17} *Mahapurush Shivananda*

¹⁸ *Shivananda Vani*, 1

never think that I am doing anything of the kind. The Master has effaced from my mind the idea that I am the guru. Shiva alone is the true guru, and in this age, Sri Ramakrishna. It is the Master who inspires people and brings them here. Again it is the Master, who, seated within me, impels me to do this, and I act accordingly. He is the Soul of my soul.”¹⁹ During this sojourn in Benares the Swami one day had an unusual vision of which he spoke to his attendants the next morning: “In the dead of night I suddenly saw before me a divine figure (evidently of Shiva), white in body, covered with ashes, the effulgence of which filled the room with light. His hair was matted. He had three eyes, and what love and compassion were in His beautiful face! As soon as I looked at Him, my consciousness was lifted and my breathing almost stopped; I plunged into samadhi and was flooded with intense bliss. As I emerged from samadhi this figure vanished, and in its place stood Sri Ramakrishna, who smiled and expressed by eloquent gestures that I should have to live on for a while, because he still had work for me to do.”²⁰ As the Master disclosed his wish to him, the Swami’s mind came down to the normal plane and he started breathing again. Later, when asked if the experience was a dream, he replied: “No, I was awake. I saw everything with open eyes.”²¹

At this time, during the Swami’s sojourn in Benares, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the great nationalist leader of India, visited the Home of Service. He was accompanied by a group of his co-workers

¹⁹⁻²¹ *Shivananda Vani*, 1

and inspected, with keen interest, the different wards, studying the scope and methods of service as rendered by the monks. He was, of course, very pleased with what he saw, as he had always expressed great admiration for the Mission's philanthropic activities. Finding out that the head of the Order was staying at the adjoining monastery, he came to pay his respects to him, and they had a very interesting conversation. It was not long before this that Mrs. Kamala Nehru came to see Mahapurush, seeking his blessing, spiritual instruction and help. The interview took place in the Swami's room upstairs at the Advaita Ashrama. She was very much impressed by the Swami's saintly presence and met him several times later at Belur. Mahapurush always entertained fatherly love for her, showing great concern for her physical and spiritual well-being. Suffering from the ravages of tuberculosis, which she had contracted in prison, she was convalescing in Switzerland, and from there she used to correspond with Mahapurush until, while still very young, she passed away.

One evening in Benares, Mahapurush was resting in his room; no one else was present except a novice seated at his feet. For a while there was silence — silence surcharged with spirituality, peace and love, when this brahmachari, full of remorse, broke the silence, saying: "Maharaj, the other day, short-sighted and ignorant as I am, I expressed unwillingness to abide by your wish, not realizing the depth of your understanding and love. But today it has dawned upon me that you alone know what is best for me, and I am ready to do whatever

you want me to.”²² With great tenderness in his voice Mahapurush observed: “That’s right! You have rightly understood. It will certainly be good for you if you listen to us and follow our instructions implicitly. Whatever we say comes direct from Sri Ramakrishna. These days I live wholly united with the Master.”²³ This incident, though small, shows what a powerful influence Mahapurush exercised over the lives of the monks and devotees; and the source of that power was Sri Ramakrishna.

The Swami and his party very soon left Benares, bound for the monastery at Belur. On the way, urged by the monks and devotees at Patna in Bihar, they broke their journey and stopped there for a few days. At that time the ashrama there, started some time before, had been conducting its work from rented quarters which were greatly cramped. The Swami had to be accommodated at the home of a gracious devotee who lived only a short distance from the ashrama. During this visit in Patna, Mahapurush attracted a large number of devotees and talked to them inspiringly, creating quite a spiritual ferment. All seemed to be beside themselves with joy and fervour. While guiding them and spurring them on in their spiritual strivings, the Swami asked the monks and devotees to work together to consolidate the ashrama, putting it on a more stable and permanent basis. It was not long before the monastery had its own home. From Patna Mahapurush and his party finally arrived at Belur, shortly before the birthday celebration of Sri Ramakrishna.

²²⁻²³ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

Long before, in the early days of the Order and immediately following his return from the West, Swami Vivekananda had conceived the idea of building a temple at Belur to be dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna. Enshrining the earthly remains of the Master, this temple would serve as a monument to his sacred memory and also as a place of worship for his many monks and devotees. Its doors would be open for the votaries of all religions without any distinction. Swamiji had wanted this temple to be a unique structure, large and beautiful, combining some of the best features of Eastern and Western styles of architecture. He had left elaborate instructions and suggestions according to which designs and blueprints were later drawn. As Swamiji intuitively knew that he would not live to see this dream of his come true, he said: "This temple will be constructed later. From above I shall see it and rejoice."²⁴ More than two decades had since passed and nothing had been done to build the temple. In the beginning of 1929, the Trustees of the Math and Mission finally decided to have at least the foundation stone laid by Swami Shivananda, the second president, and accordingly arrangements were made for the ceremony to be performed on Sri Ramakrishna's birthday, March 13 that year. It goes without saying that it was a great day at Belur when the foundation stone was laid by Mahapurush. He performed this solemn ceremony in a very prayerful and worshipful attitude, filled with the spirit of the Master. The other three living disciples of the Master—the Swamis Abhedananda and Vijnanananda, as well as Sri Mahendra Nath Gupta,—“M”—author

²⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna—were also present on the occasion, besides a large number of monks and devotees. Several years later, as funds came from unexpected quarters this temple was constructed and dedicated in a fitting manner, and it has since been attracting a constant stream of pilgrims from different parts of India and abroad.

From that period on, after the foundation of the temple, Mahapurushji's health grew steadily worse. Soon he could no longer leave Belur and visit other centres. At first he could still take short walks, but it was not long before he had to cease going out altogether. It can be truly said that, from 1927 on, one trouble followed another in the Swami's life — deaths of brother disciples, difficulties in the activities of the organization, and his own increasing physical ills. But nothing could disturb the serenity of his mind nor shake his reliance on God. Trials and tribulations, instead of damping his spirit, brought out in marked contrast the greatness of his character. While describing a true saint who is dear to the Lord, Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita: "He who hates no one and is friendly and kind to all, who is free from the feelings of 'I and mine' and evenminded in pleasure and pain, who is forbearing, ever content and steady in meditation, who is selfcontrolled and possessed of firm conviction, and who has consecrated his mind and understanding to Me—dear to Me is the one who is thus devoted to Me."²⁵ Mahapurush was indeed a saint of a very high order, endowed with all the outstanding virtues mentioned in the above passage.

²⁵ XII, 13, 14.

At the time, if anyone inquired about his health, the Swami would invariably say: "The body is not well, there is always some complaint or other, all of which indicates a summons for the final departure. I am ever ready to be gathered into His arms. By the grace of the Lord I am wholly convinced that I am not the body. He has graciously given me that knowledge to the fullest extent."²⁶ On another occasion, in a spirit of resignation, he declared: "The Lord has kindly kept me here (at Belur) for His service. I do not feel like going anywhere now I am in great peace."²⁷ Again, he said: "If it serves His purpose, He can accomplish His work even with this broken vessel. Everything is possible if He so-wishes it, and He is managing things too. He is having His work done even with this shattered body. Don't you see, although I can hardly move around, His work is being accomplished by means of this body?"²⁸

Speaking in this chapter of the Swami's physical decline may seem to the reader to bring him too near to the end of his life; there are, after all, several chapters still to be written concerning his years of consecrated service. But during by far the greater number of these years he was in the state of ill health we have described here. It is only by realizing this that one can have the necessary background for understanding and evaluating him—for recognizing the magnificent proportions of his spirituality.

CHAPTER VIII

THE IDEAL OF THE ORDER AND ITS ATTITUDE TOWARDS NATIONALISM

DURING the nineteenth century India was truly in a moribund condition, a state of moral and spiritual stupor, accompanied by economic degradation and political slavery. Indians who lacked vision and proper understanding tended to blame religion for the degeneration of their country, and so favoured scrapping, as bundles of superstition, the ideas and ideals embodied in their sacred scriptures.

As has already been said, Sri Ramakrishna was born to regenerate India by infusing her with strength and vigour through his unique life and message. What was aphoristically stated by the Master was elaborated and spread by Swami Vivekananda and his brother disciples, and the monastic order of Sri Ramakrishna became the vehicle for carrying out the Master's mission. Vedanta, which had been confined to forest hermitages and monasteries and therefore to a few scholars and monks, was brought out of seclusion by Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples. Gradually it began to permeate all strata of Hindu society, all walks of life. In dedicating itself to the twin ideal of meditation and service the Ramakrishna Math and Mission was unlike most of the ancient monastic orders, which worked exclusively for the salvation of individuals.

We have, in foregoing chapters, noted the

Order's ideal of service and how it was put into practice. But in preparing to develop our presentation of Swami Shivananda's life and work we should like to speak in a little more detail of this great ideal and its application so that the reader may be made aware of their wide social and spiritual implications—their truly immeasurable significance to humanity.

It is not enough for a monk, vowed to purity and poverty, to pursue spiritual practice in order to realize God in His transcendental aspect. Unless he also tries to serve God in humanity, he runs the risk of becoming self-centred and of feeling no concern for the sufferings of his fellows. The God whom he is trying to realize within himself by meditation, prayer and devotions is also present in man in many forms—in the hungry, destitute, sick and illiterate. Swami Vivekananda, with his keen insight, caught the suggestion and inspiration from the Master and introduced into India this dynamic phase of Vedanta—the service of God in man.

In his lectures and talks Swamiji continually pointed out the meaning of true service and its need and importance for the regeneration of India. In regard to serving man in the right spirit, namely, that of worship, he stated:

“The desire to do good is the highest motive power we have, if we know all the time that it is a privilege to help others. Do not stand on a high pedestal and take five cents in your hand and say, ‘Here, my poor man,’ but be grateful that the poor man is there, so that by making a gift to him you are able to help yourself. It is not the re-

ceiver that is blessed, but the giver. Be thankful that you are allowed to exercise your power of benevolence and mercy and thus become pure and perfect....Let us give up all this foolish talk of doing good to the world. It is not waiting for your help or mine; yet we must work and constantly do good, because it is a blessing to ourselves. That is the only way we can become perfect. No beggar we have helped owes a single cent to us; we owe everything to him, because he allowed us to exercise our charity on him. It is entirely wrong to think that we have helped such and such people Be grateful to the man you help; think of him as God. Is it not a great privilege to be allowed to worship God by helping our fellowman?"¹

Swami Shivananda and the other disciples of the Master laid down their lives in working out this idea of Swami Vivekananda. The recorded conversations of Swami Shivananda reveal how untiringly he spoke of meditation and service as complementary, how he emphasized the urgent need of both. Many times he said that meditation without concern for the happiness of others may lead to selfishness and lethargy; that philanthropic activities without regular meditation and devotions lack the right spirit and may end in distraction, confusion, and attachment. He insisted that the monks and devotees combine meditation and service, and he called this phase of Vedanta, initiated by Swami Vivekananda, Neo-Vedanta, the religion for this age.

Mahapurush was fond of pointing out how a philosophy of life based on this twin ideal would harmonize the paths of jnana, karma, bhakti and

¹ *Karma Yoga*, pp. 66-68

yoga and promote collective good with individual well-being. He would quote from Swamiji's works and proclaim with all the emphasis possible that India's salvation depends on this new phase of religion. It was his opinion that the Indian masses, inert and helpless, could not, despite the great ideas and ideals of India, be roused except by a thorough application of this religion. He liked to maintain that India's need of education, sanitation, economic betterment, organization and efficiency could truly be met only if the country followed the lead of Swamiji.

One summer day some young men studying in college at Calcutta visited the monastery at Belur. Most of them were from East Bengal, and it was to benefit from the holy association with the monks of the Ramakrishna Order that they, before leaving Calcutta, availed themselves of the first days of the summer recess to come to Belur. Addressing them, Swami Shivananda said:

"Tell me, how do you intend spending these two months of vacation? Is it good to waste time in useless fun and merry-making? Your visit to the math would then be in vain. Since you are here it would not do to go away after simply seeing the monastery buildings and having meals with us. Take some of the ideas we stand for and try to translate them into action. I presume you must have read Swami Vivekananda's works, which contain all these ideas. Try to work them out practically, as much as you can.

"Raise a small fund among yourselves, invest the sum in a homeopathic medicine chest, and take it home with you. Visit villages having poor and needy inhabitants. Give medicines to the sick and nurse them. Mix freely with the people and

find out what they need and what their grievances are. Belonging to the depressed classes as they do, they will be your slaves if you but rub shoulders with them. On top of this, if you freely give them medicine and food, you will be able to win their hearts. Start night schools for the education of adults. Tell them as much as you can about Swamiji, Sri Ramakrishna and India, along with lessons on morality. Besides, teach them a little of sanitation, education and kindred subjects. Sometimes, if you like, you may have kirtan, or offer some sugar pellets in worship to the Master for their benefit. That is how you will educate them and awaken their dormant selves.

“It may so happen that in the beginning they will avoid you, suspecting that you have some selfish motives back of your activities, but later when they find you have no axe to grind they will open their hearts to you. You will in this way learn to be unselfish. Your minds will be purified through unselfish work and your hearts will be filled with thoughts of God and devotion for Him. Without this purification, no amount of repetition of His name will help you. What good will the repetition of His name do, if you cherish selfishness, jealousy and envy in your hearts? Noticing the country sunk in inertia and lethargy, Swami Vivekananda prescribed work of this kind. After passing University examinations and being educated, if you cannot renounce your selfish interests for the welfare of the many, your schooling is good for nothing. What will it avail you, if you just slave for a living?

“You are the descendants of the ancient seers of India. Even now in your veins courses the pure Hindu blood. Don't you feel ashamed to be slaves for your living? You talk about patriotism; what can be more practically patriotic than this? A person does not become a patriot by simply singing national anthem like ‘O.

Mother India, I love you!’ or by delivering lectures. If you want to be practical Vedantists or genuine patriots, do what I have told you. Spread education among the Indian masses. You represent young Bengal. Swamiji placed so much hope in you!”²

India’s prime need is education, and this education should be strictly along national lines, in keeping with her cultural heritage. The educational system introduced by the British, with all the points in its favour, has been rather foreign to the soil. There is no denying the fact that it has brought India out from her seclusion, revealing to her the existence of a wider world with its many gifts. But it has also done her some positive harm, for it has in a way denationalized a certain section of her people, particularly those who live in cities.

Sometimes there came to Belur Indians who, though educated, seemed to be quite Westernized in their habits and manner of thinking. Mahapurush was always pained to see their ways. By his talks he would drive home to them the foolishness of blind imitation and the desirability of being patriotic, of holding on to the time-honoured traditions, institutions and usages of the country. Emphatically he would proclaim to them the glories of India and her culture—her sense of eternal values, her philosophy of life and her religion. Yielding to none in so far as breadth of vision is concerned, the Swami was very cosmopolitan; yet sometimes he could not very well help being impatient with those who were carried away

² *Sri Sri Mahapurushjir Katha*

by the glammers of the West. He would warn them again and again against the pitfalls of Western civilization and its materialistic approach to life. He emphasized the fact that if they were to discard their own religion—the religion with which they had been born, the religion that had sustained their ancestors—in favour of something coming from abroad, they would be doomed.

Addressing a devotee, the Swami once passionately exclaimed:

“Don’t you see what a hundred and fifty years of English education and its influence have done to us? We are about to lose our individuality and national heritage. We have come to such a pass not simply because of our political subjection. We have been a subject nation for a long time. The Mohammedans, even after eight or nine hundred years’ domination, had not been able to destroy our distinctive national culture. But the Western civilization has such an attraction and the British have so cleverly instilled their ideas into our minds that we have not been at all aware of the fact that it is their object to uproot our culture and religious belief. As a consequence, our thought currents have undergone a change, and in many ways within so short a time this great nation has been Westernized.

“The worst harm has been that the Hindus as a race have almost lost their faith in the eternal Vedic religion. All that is found in Hinduism is false and imaginary, and whatever those from the West proclaim is infallible — that has been the attitude of many Indians. It was the intention of the British gradually to convert the entire Hindu race to Christianity. If the religion of Vedanta were to be destroyed, this act would undermine the spiritual foundation of the whole world. That is not to be, for God willed it other-

wise. God incarnated Himself as Sri Ramakrishna to protect and revitalize the religion of Vedanta. Strange as it may seem, Sri Ramakrishna started his spiritual career as a temple priest, worshipping God in the image, a thing which had been so often ridiculed as idolatry. The Master's all-comprehensive spiritual practices and realizations have since astounded the world. Many savants in the West have since recognised the greatness of Vedanta. It has had its repercussion upon India too. The Hindus who thoughtlessly loved to imitate others are now turning their attention upon the Master's life as well as upon their own religion. Since the advent of Sri Ramakrishna a marked change has come over the country."³

The vast majority of India's population live in primitive villages in a state of utter wretchedness and destitution. They do not have any educational facilities worthy of the name. Because of the lack of education they are unable to stand on their own feet, helping themselves. The ancient system of mass education, the outcome of centuries of experimentation, had been natural to the soil of India. It was thoughtlessly done away with without being replaced by something equally satisfactory. The result has been obvious.

The question of how to educate India's teeming millions and to improve their condition continues to be a grave problem—one which the leaders of India can no longer neglect. So gigantic and difficult a task can be accomplished only if those leaders have the right understanding of their cultural heritage, and in addition to that, infinite love, patience and

³ *Shivananda Vani*, II

readiness for self-sacrifice. It was with prophetic vision that Swami Vivekananda sounded his note of warning fifty years ago, declaring that India's regeneration would be impossible until the masses, representing the real India, had the light of education and a higher standard of living. Swamiji's heart bled for the masses, and he moved heaven and earth to lay the foundations for the amelioration of their unhappy lot. To the monks and devotees of Sri Ramakrishna he left as a legacy his great love and sympathy for the Indian poor. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission accordingly has always diligently conducted its programme of educational and philanthropic activities in India. Swami Shivananda, as head of the Order, followed in the footsteps of Swami Vivekananda, inspiring monks and devotees with the ideals of sacrifice and service. In his recorded conversations we find how often and with what feeling he pleaded for service to the poor.

Despite India's economic and political degradation she has a glorious mission to accomplish; having brought about her own regeneration she will be called upon to help the West in the realm of ideals. The nations of Europe and America, drunk with prosperity and power, may not yet appreciate this fact. They have made tremendous progress in the domain of science and are enjoying great comforts and luxuries derived from the application of scientific knowledge. However, this knowledge has also certainly given birth to much that is diabolical, evils which they cannot escape, as the last two terrible wars have

proved. Swami Shivananda did not live to see the second of these wars, but with consternation he beheld indications of its coming. He believed that only Vedanta with its comprehensive view of life, capable of reconciling science and religion, could save the West. He believed further that, just as the West can profit by accepting some of the ideas and ideals embodied in Indian philosophy and religion, so India can benefit by the adoption of Western science, and especially its advanced methods in the fields of education, sanitation, agriculture, and industry.

Swami Vivekananda, by his dynamic exposition of Vedanta, raised India in the estimation of the world. Worshipped as India's patriot-saint, he was proud of his country and her civilization; yet he was not a patriot in the ordinary, narrow sense of the term. He pointed out that India's contribution to the sum total of human progress had been very great in the past and would be still greater in the future. He toiled assiduously to awaken the self-consciousness and self-respect of his people and constantly reminded them of their responsibilities. He knew that India could not be her real self and play her God-given role effectively until she became economically and politically emancipated.

Being the foremost disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, an Incarnation of God, Swamiji was a world teacher—a teacher of men in his own right. He came not simply for India but for all races and nations. His love of India and his programme of service to her were just a means to the loftier objective of serving God and all men completely.

He saw clearly that a religious organization, especially a monastic order, cannot maintain its purity and singleness of purpose if it becomes entangled in the meshes of politics. In the past, religious organizations that gained temporal power through politics deviated from the spiritual path; they became corrupt and lent themselves to forces of exploitation and tyranny. While wishing God-speed to all legitimate movements working for the political freedom of the country, Swamiji was wise in counselling the monks of the Order to eschew politics and avoid that form of nationalism which is narrow and hidebound, concerned exclusively with the interests of a particular country, and hence unconcerned with the larger well-being of humanity. He asked his monks to serve all men as manifestations of God, irrespective of race, creed and nationality, and to do so in cooperation with all.

Swami Shivananda, as president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, strictly followed Swamiji's policy of avoiding politics and guided all activities in a manner consonant with a purely religious organization. There were, however, notable men who worked in other fields to regenerate India and lift up her masses, and their efforts proved complementary to those of the monks of the Ramakrishna Order. Among such men Mahatma Gandhi's name is outstanding. Mahatmaji will go down in history as one of the greatest leaders of India. His contribution in the field of politics is most substantial. Politics had been in the past a crooked game without concern for ethics or for

God. Mahatmaji tried to bring into it the higher forces of morality and religion; he endeavoured to spiritualize politics. Himself the very soul of gentleness, truthfulness, sacrifice and love, he was a warrior of an unusual type. He believed in righting wrongs by soul-force; he wielded soul-force to combat political and social injustice. Refusing to submit to gross indignities and base iniquities, he dared fight the mightiest power in the world, the British Empire, and he did it with his singular weapon of non-co-operation; he taught his countrymen to bear persecutions without retaliation.

During the year 1923 India was in the throes of a revolution, a bloodless revolution of gigantic proportions. Gandhi, India's nationalist leader and apostle of non-violence, had started his Non-co-operation Movement—a campaign of moral pressure designed to force the British Government to grant self-rule to India. There was a tremendous political upheaval resulting in countless arrests, imprisonments and persecutions.

The Ramakrishna Math and Mission watched the progress of the Non-co-operation Movement with keen interest, but did not participate in it. While this attitude was strictly in line with their usual policy, it was not to be accounted for in relation to that policy alone, for there were other determining factors, the most salient perhaps being certain convictions regarding the policy of non-resistance.

We have already noted that Swami Shivananda—and he was typical of his Order—gave much emphasis to Sri Krishna's appeal in the Bhagavad Gita

for man's self-reliance, manliness and courage. In the second chapter of the Gita Sri Krishna calls Arjuna a hypocrite and a coward because of his refusal to fight or offer resistance. Such a challenge in no way constitutes a denial that non-resistance is one of the highest ideals, but it recognizes the fact that most men, being not yet ready to practise the highest of which they may later be capable, must practise the highest of which they are now capable, and by so doing eventually become prepared to live up to a more exalted standard.

If we turn to the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, we find the Swami throwing light on this subject of resistance and non-resistance. He says:

“In our heart of hearts we feel the truth of the maxim, ‘Resist not evil.’ All great teachers have said that non-resistance is the highest moral ideal. Yet to teach this doctrine would be equivalent to condemning a vast portion of mankind. If a certain number of us attempted to put it fully into practice, the whole social fabric would fall to pieces, the wicked would take possession of our properties and lives. Not only so, it would make men feel that they were always doing wrong; they would have scruples of conscience in all their actions. It would weaken them, and constant self-disapproval would breed more vice than would any other weakness. We have to recognize that duty and morality vary under different circumstances; that the man who resists evil is not doing what is always and in itself wrong — in some circumstances it may become even his duty to resist evil.

“The ideas of serenity and non-resistance have been preached for thousands of years; everybody has heard of them from childhood, and yet

we see very few who have really reached that stage. I do not know if I have seen twenty persons in my life who were really calm and non-resisting, and I have travelled over half the world. We must always be careful about what we really mean when we speak of non-resistance. One man does not resist because he is weak, lazy, and cannot, not because he will not; another man knows that he can strike an irresistible blow if he likes; yet he not only does not strike, but blesses his enemies. The one who from weakness resists not commits a sin, and as such cannot receive any benefit from non-resistance; while the other would commit a sin by offering resistance.

“Inactivity should be avoided by all means. Activity always signifies resistance. Resist all evils, mental and physical, and when you have succeeded in resisting, then will calmness come. A man must be active to pass through activity to perfect calmness. The highest ideal is indeed non-resistance — it is the highest manifestation of power in actual possession. Resisting of evil is but a step on the way towards the manifestation of this highest power, — namely non-resistance. Before reaching this highest ideal, man’s duty is to resist evil; let him work, let him fight, let him strike straight from the shoulder. Then only, when he has gained the power to resist, will non-resistance be a virtue.”⁴

It will be well to discuss a little more fully this concept of resistance and non-resistance in relation to the Hindu doctrine of swadharma, which has been so beautifully explained by Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. Although all men look alike, belonging to the same species, with common ties and

⁴ *Karma Yoga*, p. 16

characteristics, they are individuals. Representing different stages of growth, they differ in so far as tastes, temperaments and capacities are concerned. Naturally their approaches to life and self-expression vary, even as different explorers may follow different trails to reach the top of a mountain. It would, therefore, be a great mistake to standardize morality and religion and to force upon one and all the same set forms. Not only would it be unnatural, it would be disastrous. Vedanta recognizes this truth and wisely presents a comprehensive system of ethics and religion that fits all types. Vedanta gives every man absolute freedom to choose his own path and pursue it in his own way. A man will be truly moral and spiritual and ultimately attain Illumination—the Goal—if he is true to himself and follows the laws of his own being. That is what is meant by swadharma. The doctrine of swadharma nicely harmonizes with nature's plan of creation which maintains uniformity in variety.

The Hindu scheme of life according to castes and stages, an ancient institution developed through centuries, was based upon this doctrine of swadharma. Knowing that there were differences amongst individuals, and wishing to utilize to the best advantage the services of all for collective well-being, the ancient Hindu leaders divided society into four castes and the life of an individual into four stages. The caste system, as it was originally planned, was just an intelligent division of labour, without any idea of competition, also of rights and privileges. The castes were never meant to be arbitrary classes, exclusive of each other and with

conflicting interests. They were supposed to be component parts of an organic whole, in which each was useful and important in its own place, working in co-operation with the rest. In the same way, the stages of life were like the different rungs of a ladder, one leading to another. Just as the different limbs, the trunk, branches, leaves, blossoms, fruits, and roots, have their individual functions which work in unison for the health and growth of the tree as a whole, the same principle held good in the case of the Hindu society with its castes and stages of life.

The Brahmins, for example, representing priests and teachers, carried on their spiritual and educational work, helping both themselves and others. The Kshatriyas, rulers and warriors, took care of the government, maintaining order and harmony, as well as safe-guarding the country against external aggression. The Vaishyas and Shudras, representing merchants, artisans, farmers and labourers, looked after the physical and economic necessities. Just as standards of virtue and spheres of duty varied amongst castes, they varied also in different stages of life. The students, householders, forest-recluses and monks performed the duties peculiar to the stages of their life, in accordance with the laws of their own being. Says Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita: "Better is one's own dharma, though imperfectly performed, than the dharma of another well done. Preferable is death following one's own religion; the religion of another is fraught with danger."⁵ Here the

⁵ III, 35

Lord in language that is unmistakable emphasizes the need and importance of the performance of swadharma.

It should be noted that in ancient India individuals belonging to each caste and stage, while pursuing their respective avocations and duties, always kept in view the collective interest and the supreme purpose of life which is Illumination. By so doing they performed their swadharma and made faster progress towards that end. When there was a clash between individual interest and collective good or the attainment of Illumination, it was always the latter which overruled the former. There is a Sanskrit verse which admonishes: "For the family sacrifice the individual; for the community the family; for the country the community, and for the soul the whole world."

In so far as the practice of resistance or non-resistance is concerned, naturally it varied with individuals according to their castes and stages of life. A monk, for instance, who was supposed to be beyond castes, having more of the sattva element and standing for the highest ideal, was supposed to be calm and gentle, truthful and kind, sacrificing and ascetic. His was a life of voluntary renunciation, consecrated service, and contemplation. He should not by any means resist evil, physical or mental. He should try to conquer evil by goodness, hatred by love; so also should a Brahmin, the highest of the castes. A Kshatriya, on the other hand, having more of rajas and standing for strength, valour and all the qualities that contribute to chivalry, being responsible for the maintenance

of law and order, was expected to be a warrior of the highest type. If the circumstances demanded action and aggression he was to resist evil, but without passion or prejudice, and similarly for individuals belonging to the two remaining castes.

Arjuna, to whom the message of the Bhagavad Gita was addressed, represented the warrior caste. Although an outstanding hero of his time, Arjuna too had his moments of weakness. Seated in his chariot stationed on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, in view of the vast armies of both sides, he was overcome by a momentary feeling of weakness mixed with commiseration. He seemed for the time being to be paralyzed, willing to lay down his arms and own defeat rather than to fight. He was ready to renounce his throne and legitimate rights and take to the life of a forest-recluse. It was undoubtedly unmanliness and timidity, masquerading as compassion and dispassion. Arjuna was not aware that he was shirking his duties and responsibilities as a leader. He did not realize that his own life and happiness were closely bound up with the life and happiness of his fellowmen and that he had no right to imperil theirs. His action, if he allowed himself to be swept off his feet by this momentary impulse, would undermine society and religion. That was why Sri Krishna remonstrated with him and exhorted him to wake up and fight. But the Lord insisted on Arjuna's resisting for the sake of duty, without any attachment or aversion—without any ego. Arjuna obeyed, and in so doing he performed his swadharma—helped himself and others, and eventually attained Illumination.

There is no doubt that resistance is an evil—an unpleasant and thankless task. One who is gentle and good naturally tries to avoid it. In the realm of phenomena, governed by the pairs of opposites, there is no such thing as absolute good. Every fact, experience, or act has a smaller or larger share of good as well as of evil. Such being the case, the proper alternative is to choose a line of conduct that involves a lesser evil in preference to a greater. It is a matter of common experience that in our relationships with the world, resistance is sometimes a lesser evil than non-resistance. That was why Sri Krishna justified war rather than pacifism. But, of course, by war he meant righteous war—fighting in self-defence or for a noble cause, when all peaceful alternatives failed. When the body has an infection and when milder methods are of no avail to throw off the poison, one has to take recourse to surgery. So long as most human beings are what they are and remain so, society must protect itself against the inroads of those who are selfish, lustful and criminal, by maintaining police forces and armies. When a bandit enters your house, ready to rob you and do violence to you and to your wife and children, and when he is not amenable to good counsel, what are you to do? You should, of course, resist him and resist him effectively. Your action will be a check upon future similar depredations. It is such considerations that justify the necessity and importance of maintaining a warrior caste in a body politic, and the warriors should be guided in their actions by a code of higher ethics and religion.

The caste system, as it prevailed in ancient times, was simple, elastic and progressive, and protected India from many a catastrophe—social, economic and political. Gradually, for many reasons, during its course through the centuries, this institution became complex, rigid, and hereditary, bringing into being many subcastes in addition to the four original ones. Deviating from the purpose it was supposed to serve, the caste system degenerated and degenerated hopelessly. Instead of giving full opportunities for self-expression to individuals belonging to different walks and stages of life, it became a tool of oppression in the hands of the privileged few who held the reins of society. Because of the lack of true leadership, people drifted and forgot the ideal of swadharma. From time to time attempts were made to reform the social scheme, and sometimes quite successfully. There is no doubt that modern Hindu society very badly needs re-adjustment and reform, and this is a gigantic task. The many evils that have crept into it and are eating into its vitals—untouchability, for instance—have to be eradicated. Extraneous reform according to Western patterns, being foreign to the genius of the race, would do more harm than good. It should be rather evolution than revolution, and that is what Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples along with a few others have tried to bring about by emphasizing the practice of the strengthening and life-giving principles of Vedanta, in particular its doctrine of the Divinity of man.

So far as the ideal of non-resistance in modern times is concerned, only monks of whom India has

a large number can and should try to practise it in the fullest sense of the term. It is for the monks to uphold the highest ideal of gentleness, goodness, non-injury and peacefulness. Householders of all castes should by all means aim to be strong and dynamic, throwing off the inertia, lethargy and cowardice that have come over them. They should resist evil in all forms and resist it effectively for the sake of duty, for the sake of collective good; otherwise they will be wiped off from the face of this earth—a fact evidenced by the many happenings in India. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. Sri Ramakrishna explains this point by a parable of the teacher and his snake disciple. Once upon a time a teacher came across a snake, very sincere and earnest, and with genuine spiritual inclinations. The teacher initiated the snake with the sacred mantra and asked it to meditate, living a life of non-injury. The snake followed the advice of the guru to the best of its knowledge and ability, giving up all acts of violence, and living upon grass, fruits and roots. Youngsters of the neighbourhood where the snake had its hole, discovered, to their surprise, the strange behaviour of this reptile and had a lot of fun at its expense. They would catch it by the tail and dash it against the ground and play similar pranks. In spite of these provocative acts, the snake remained calm and never retaliated. Finally, in order to escape the persecutions of the children, it was compelled to hide itself in its hole and live upon air. After a time the guru happened to pass that way and was looking about, enquiring for his snake disciple.

The snake, reduced to almost a skeleton, came out of its hole and prostrated itself before its guru, who was filled with pity when he heard the story. Realizing that his disciple had misunderstood his precept of non-injury, the teacher rebuked him, saying: "I asked you to refrain from biting anyone. But why didn't you hiss in self-defence?" In modern times men and women — householders, living their lives in the world, should, in the same way "hiss" and make a show of resisting evil, without ill-will or malice. Thus they can protect themselves against thieves, robbers and hoodlums.

Monks should, of course, always practise absolute non-resistance, whatever may be the cost. Once upon a time a holy man, vowed to renunciation, chastity and compassion, was walking along a road that followed the bank of a river. In the course of his promenade the holy man noticed a scorpion swept on by the current of the stream. It was a live scorpion, struggling in vain to reach the shore. The monk, pitying the scorpion and wishing to save it from a watery grave, went down the steep bank, lifted the creature from the water with the palm of his hand and placed it on dry land. In so doing, he was stung by the scorpion. Although suffering pain, the monk had the satisfaction of having done some thing benevolent. Continuing on his way, he noticed that the scorpion had, somehow or other returned to the water and was again struggling for its life. Still prompted by the saintly impulse of compassion, the monk for the second time snatched it out of the water, and once more was stung. Brooding over the vile, ungrateful nature of the

scorpion while trying to overcome his pain, the monk observed the reptile for the third time in the water. This time he told himself that he would leave the creature to its doom and as he was about to resume his walk he heard a divine voice saying: "A scorpion can be only a scorpion; it is its nature to sting. You are a holy man; yours is to protect and save." The monk followed the dictates of his higher self and for the third time took the scorpion out of the water.

There can be no doubt that Gandhi, by working in his chosen way, contributed in a large measure to India's attainment of her cherished goal of swaraj or self-government (August, 1947). Yet, considering her present grave difficulties, we cannot but realize that the whole situation might have been better. If the powerful leaders working in the economic and political fields had years ago aroused in the masses of common people the fires of strength, courage and resistance, events long since would have taken a different turn. India need not have paid so heavy a price for her liberation; she could have escaped internal dissension and partition.

However, the fact remains that she is now free and is courageously facing her problems. The unnecessary aggravation of her difficulties has, after all, to be looked upon only as an added handicap, in the overriding of which she will but demonstrate the more magnificently her innate worth. Swamiji's great plan for India's complete regeneration cannot fail of fulfilment. The Ramakrishna Order, working in its own avowed way, with the object of making real in regard to India the sublime dreams

of both Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji, was itself powerfully instrumental in achieving Indian independence; and its work continues, constantly growing. It will exert a mighty influence in achieving the ends sought by the free Indian nation.

The plan of Swamiji is so vast that all other worldly plans for India seem to fit into it. Time is, of course, necessary to the working out of so all-inclusive a project. Swamiji himself knew this well, as did also Swami Shivananda, who likewise could envision the process of the ideal becoming real — could perceive the entire picture, knowing how to evaluate and place, as in a mosaic, all the individuals and forces labouring to give India her place in the sun.

At the time when Gandhi's Non-cooperation Movement had thrown India into turmoil, a small minority of Indians were critical of the Ramakrishna Order's stand in regard to it. Occasionally someone would approach Swami Shivananda to question him about the matter, and his replies, besides explaining the attitude of the Order, give excellent and representative indications of his own comprehensive vision and of the comprehensiveness of the ideal for which he laboured. For example, a young man and devotee, whom we may call K, very earnest and in full sympathy with the Non-cooperation Movement, came to the math, and after paying his respects to Mahapurush unburdened his grievances to him. We reproduce here the conversation ⁶ that followed:

⁶ *Shivananda Vani*, I

Devotee: "Maharaj, at this hour the whole country is stirred to its very depths by the Non-cooperation Movement of Mahatma Gandhi. Countless men and women are rotting in jails. Many have already laid down their lives, and Mahatmaji himself has also plunged into the sea of danger. But why is the Ramakrishna Mission silent in this immense countrywide movement? Haven't you any contribution to make? The entire nation is wondering at the ways of the Ramakrishna Mission. Has not the Mission some duty in this national struggle for freedom?" Finally, in a tone of grievance, the devotee added: "Don't you feel for the country at all? Are you powerless to do anything in this matter?"

Swami Shivananda's calm face assumed a serious aspect. After a while he broke the silence saying:

"Well, K, the doings of a Divine Incarnation are beyond the reach of the average intellect. How can you or the nation understand the ways of divine action? When God embodies Himself as man, He does so for no particular race or nation, but for the good of the whole world. The manifestation this time is of the highest sattvika aspect of the Lord. The Incarnation, Sri Ramakrishna, is the embodiment of perfect sattva.....

"It was in order to spread his sattvika spiritual thought that Sri Ramakrishna brought with him as his assistant such a powerful soul as Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji could certainly have stirred the country to political revolution, had he so chosen. Who is more patriotic than he was? How many hearts bleed for the downtrodden masses as did his? Swamiji did not start a revolution. Had he known it would really help India, he would surely have done so.

“Aside from Swami Vivekananda, even we, by the grace of the Lord, have such power within us that we could revolutionize the country if we so wished, but the Master would not permit us to do so. He brought us here to assist him in his work, and he is constantly leading us by the hand in all that we do for the good of the country and its people. Believe me when I say our only desire is to advance the good of the world. How can I explain to you the depth of our feeling for the miseries of the people?.....It was Swamiji who called us together and engaged us in works of service — the service of God in humanity. Even in our old age we have been carrying on that work.”

Devotee: “Maharaj, do you mean that Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders have not been doing genuine national service? Their unique spirit of service, fortitude and sacrifice cannot be ignored. How much ill-treatment and persecution are they suffering for the sake of the country!”

The Swami: “No, I do not mean that. Their renunciation, fortitude and national service are indeed praiseworthy. Their lives are surely great and exemplary, and they have done India much good, working for what they sincerely believe to be beneficial. However, our plan of work is different. Do you know what we think about the nationalist leaders? In doing these services they are inspired by certain particular thoughts of Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji. There is no doubt about it — Mahatma Gandhi is really endowed with great powers....

“The Mother of the Universe, awakened by Sri Ramakrishna for the good of the world, is obviously working in various ways through the instrumentality of different persons. Many times in his lectures Swami Vivekananda stated what

constitutes India's true well-being. Solutions he proposed for the regeneration of the country twenty-five or thirty years ago, — the abolition of untouchability, the elevation of the depressed classes, the spread of education among the masses, and so on — are now being preached by Mahatma Gandhi.

“ Though we may not voice our ideas and sentiments loudly in newspaper articles, we are actually accomplishing things, not through politics, but in our own way. Mahatmaji is working out similar ideas through politics. Just as we are labouring at home because we are interested in India's welfare, so we are labouring abroad because we are equally interested in other races and countries. Of course, in view of peculiar circumstances and conditions our plan of activity varies in different places. Every monk of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission established by Swamiji is dedicated to the ideal ‘ For one's own salvation and for the good of the world ’ and is engaged in service according to the injunctions of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. ”

Devotee: “ But, Maharaj, the national awakening caused by the Non-cooperation Movement of Mahatmaji would have received an added impetus if the Ramakrishna Math and Mission had cooperated with it. This opinion, far from being just my own, is held by many thoughtful people in the country. Why don't you cooperate with Mahatmaji in his national campaign ? ”

The Swami: “ Well, K, I told you at the outset that we are working in our own way in accordance with our own ideal. The manifestation of divine power we see in Sri Ramakrishna is unique. There had not been such a manifestation for many centuries. The wave of spirituality generated by the Master will roll on unimpeded over all the world for a long time.

This is just the beginning, the prelude. The spiritual sun which has appeared on the horizon of India will illumine the entire world with its pure undimmed rays. That is why Swamiji said, 'This time India is the centre.' Spiritual power will be manifested with India as the centre. Who can stem the tide of this divine power? The regeneration of India is absolutely certain. India's advance in art, science, education and philosophy — in every field, secular and spiritual, will be so great that it will astonish the whole world. Compared with her future achievement her glorious past will pale into insignificance. Then you will realize why the Master and Swamiji came, and how much they contributed to the well-being of India. What can the limited mind of man understand about the doings of those divine beings? Don't you see that they have awakened the national kundalini⁷ of India "

⁷ The word kundalini literally means the power of a snake lying coiled and asleep. Figuratively, it is applied to the dormant potential energy of a man, to be roused and manifested through spiritual discipline. Just as the inert, coiled-up snake wakes up and moves around, expressing life and strength, man can be his real self—illuminated, perfect, free and blessed by rousing his sleeping spiritual energy. Like individuals, races and nations have their potentialities. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda by their spiritual efforts have been instrumental in awaking the self-consciousness of India that had been asleep for such a long time. In the course of time India will express herself fully.

CHAPTER IX

THE TEACHER — HIS COMPASSION, GREATNESS

Swami Shivananda was obviously an extraordinary teacher — a guru by divine right, who radiated unusual spiritual power and wisdom and brought solace and peace to many weary souls. Yet his role was quite different from that of a professional minister or preacher of religion. Very seldom did he stand upon the public platform or address large audiences. It was to select groups of monks and devotees hungry for the Truth that he would talk, and always he spoke informally and unpretentiously. Many came to him with their spiritual problems, seeking his help and guidance; there were others who approached him to ask abstruse questions of philosophy and religion — the Vedanta. He ministered to the individual needs and capacities of all. He would explain philosophy and religion according to the time-honoured tenets of Vedanta, and in a manner typical of all the direct disciples of the Master. Avoiding high-flown language and hair-splitting arguments, he brought out clearly the subtle points involved, and carried conviction to his hearers.

There was an electrical quality in the Swami's talks. The secret of his power was his spiritual background and realization, which he owed to Sri Ramakrishna. This world has no dearth of scholars who can give learned philosophical discourses; but how many can substantiate their statements by

actual experience? In the realm of the spirit it is actual experience which is truly effective.

As to his own realization, the Swami one day said to some devotees: "I am happy. I have realized the Purnam (the Infinite) by the grace of the Master."¹ He then joyously chanted the peace invocation from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: "All that is invisible is verily the Infinite. All that is visible is also the Infinite." To encourage those present he then added: "You also will realize the Purnam. You have realized — to a certain degree — you are realizing, and you will realize more by the grace of our Blessed Lord. All of you who have come under the protecting wings of Sri Ramakrishna will know the great Truth."²

It was remarkable how the Swami, although physically weak and disabled, could easily detach himself from the body and its limitations and be in excellent spirits. He always expressed calmness, peace and joy, no matter how sick the body was. In him the qualities that characterize a knower of God, a liberated soul established in the supreme wisdom, were fully manifest. The great truths he taught to the monks and devotees he himself embodied and lived from day to day. His was a true comprehensiveness of vision, for he appreciated all approaches to God, thinking of Him and enjoying Him in every way. Thus, his life represented a harmonious blending of bhakti or devotion, yoga or concentration, karma or action, and jnana or knowledge. He was, indeed, all in one: a devotee par excellence, enjoying the Elysian

¹⁻² *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna*

bliss of divine communion; a yogi who could lose himself in deep meditation; an ideal selfless worker, tirelessly labouring for the good of others; and an uncompromising knower of Brahman.

The following excerpts³ from the Swami's recorded conversations throw a flood of light upon his all-inclusive concept of the nature of the Ultimate Reality:

“If one persists in thinking of Him as having forms, eventually He reveals His real Self to him. The Reality, is not exhausted in the world of phenomena. Gross is this world; beyond that is the subtle, the causal and the supercausal; beyond all these is the transcendental. Meditation on the Formless is very difficult, but the Vedas speak of making ether His symbol. One may also have the ocean or a vast field as His symbol. Ether is, however, by far the best symbol. ‘He is smaller than the smallest atom, greater than the greatest thing.’ He is again radiantly present in the hearts of all beings. In the preliminary stages of meditation one has necessarily to think of Him as having forms.

“The question of one viewpoint being higher than another should not arise; it is temperamental difference that accounts for various viewpoints. Each viewpoint is great to the person who holds it. He who has forms becomes formless, and the formless manifests with forms. He is again beyond both these aspects. One cannot understand Him with this mind, He being accessible only to a pure mind. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say: ‘The pure mind and the Self are identical.’ When the mind becomes free from impressions and desires it cannot, strictly speaking, be called mind any longer — it becomes synonymous with the one Universal Intelligence,

³ *Sri Sri Mahapurushjir Katha*

the Supreme Energy or Brahman — give it any name you please. To suit the temperamental needs of aspirants, the one Universal Intelligence assumes a crystallized form of consciousness.

“Inscrutable are these matters. A person cannot understand these ideas of Vedanta unless he engages in constant selfless activity, hearing (words of the scriptures), thinking (about them), worship, study, japa and meditation, a taste for which he develops spontaneously through His grace. Unless He is gracious, one does not feel like calling upon Him, having a distaste for His name and for things spiritual.....It is absurd to speak in terms of higher or lower in reference to concepts of God having a form or not, as both viewpoints relate to God. It is the same Ganga whether it is at Kalighat, Belur, Dakshineswar, Benares, Allahabad or Hardwar.”

On another occasion the Swami said:

“What are called space, time and causation in English are desha, kala and nimitta in our language. Brahman is beyond these categories. Freedom means going beyond them. Precisely, one does not go anywhere by attaining freedom — where can one go? It represents a state of consciousness in which there is an end of all limitations. To go beyond the world is to have the knowledge that Brahman is both immanent and transcendent. The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman — in essence the embodied soul does not have any separate existence.....Freedom is not achieving something external; it is Self-knowledge attained by the renunciation of phenomena.”⁴

The crowning glory of Vedanta is its assertion of the divinity of man. In spite of his many frailties and limitations, man is fundamentally

⁴ Sri Sri Mahapurushjir Katha

Divine — perfect, pure, free and blessed. Even those who seem to be very low, who live in the depths of stupidity and vice, have the potentialities of God Himself. With the dawn of spiritual understanding, all men will wake from the nightmare of their present existence and claim their divine heritage.

In his dealings with the monks and devotees of the Order and with the many men and women who visited him, Mahapurush would always emphasize this point. It was not, with him, a matter of mere intellectual conviction, but a truth known by direct personal experience. He actually saw the Divine in man, and his great compassion and forgiveness were based upon this perception. He would condemn no one as a sinner or weakling. Time and again when some devotee or monk proved disobedient and recalcitrant, and the natural course would have been to deal severely with him, the Swami demonstrated unlimited patience and understanding and tried to reform him by his love. Further, there sometimes came to the Swami people so sunk in sin and degradation that they seemed past all hope. Ignoring their failings and continual lapses, he would bless even these—he would initiate them and take spiritual responsibility for them.

The following incident is illustrative of this:

“One morning Swami Shivananda, after lying down for a while, was seated on his cot. He seemed solemn and indrawn, but suddenly said to the attendant standing near: ‘Will you go and see if there is someone who wants initiation?’ The attendant looked here and there and then went downstairs, where he found a woman who wanted initiation. After inquiry he was

startled by the information she gave about herself. She was young and had come from a village She told the story of her sinful life and said that, although born in a Brahmin family, she had kept bad company and gone astray In a remorseful tone she said, 'May I not see him (Mahapurushji) once?'

"When the attendant, looking disturbed, returned to the Swami, the latter inquired very earnestly, 'Tell me, is someone there?' The attendant reluctantly replied, 'Maharaj, it is a lady who wants initiation, but' Before the attendant could finish what he felt he must say, Mahapurush remarked, 'What of that? Ask her to bathe in the Ganga and come to me after visiting the shrine. Sri Ramakrishna is the redeemer of the fallen. He came especially to uplift them. What will happen to them if he does not come to their rescue? One could not then call him the saviour of the fallen.'

"The Swami was ready to shower his blessings upon her, and later, when after her bath, she came for initiation he said, as if he knew everything about her: 'What is there to fear, my daughter? You will certainly be blessed, since you have taken refuge in Sri Ramakrishna, our Master and Saviour. Declare this: 'Whatever sins I have committed in this life and in lives past, I offer them here (*i.e.*, to the Master) and I will sin no more.' After initiation the woman appeared to be an altogether new person.

"Later that day the Swami remarked: 'Do you know why there is so much sickness in this body — so much suffering? The sins of others are being worked out in this body; if not, why should it suffer so much?'"⁵

Man in essence is a child of Immortal Bliss, and even if he is not yet spiritually awake, he should not

⁵ *Shivananda Vani*, 1

lose his cheerfulness. That is what Vedanta teaches, and Mahapurush ever stressed this point, insisting upon a wholesome, cheerful out-look on life. Yet, always noted for his austerity and dignity of bearing, he would have been the last person to encourage frivolity among the monks. Nevertheless, he did not believe that one had to wear a long face and be sad in order to be spiritual.

For example, one night after supper some monks were gathered together in a joyous mood on the lower floor of the main monastery building. The sounds of their merriment reached the Swami's room upstairs. Rejoicing, he smiled and remarked to those who were near: "The boys are certainly having a good laugh. That shows they are quite happy. Ah! They have renounced their homes for bliss. O Lord, do keep them blissful! May they continue to enjoy happiness!"⁶

To a person established in the knowledge of Brahman, the seemingly manifold universe is the expression of one life and consciousness. Finding Brahman within himself and in every other being, everywhere, such a person is free from passion, prejudice, hatred and attachment. Great is his sympathy — the sorrows and pains of the entire human family become his own. His sole purpose in life being to promote the welfare of all, whatever he does is directed toward that end. The greater part of his labours may be in the field of spirituality, but he feels equally for those who are not yet ready for spiritual light—the poor and the down-trodden whose immediate need is for the ordinary necessities of life.

⁶ *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna*

It has been mentioned that the Swami sweetened the lives of many spiritual aspirants by helping them in their struggles. The number of those was not small, who became his ardent admirers because of his kindly words of cheer or help even in worldly difficulties, and they belonged to all walks and stations of life. The fishermen plying their trade on the Ganga, the labourers working on the grounds adjoining the monastery, the servants of devotees, the taxi drivers bringing visitors, the milkmen, the gardeners — all indeed who had occasions to know the Swami had a soft corner for him in their hearts. They felt, every one of them, that he spoke their language, the language of sympathy, and they would not think of leaving the monastery without paying their respects to him. After he became physically unable to go downstairs to meet people, he would sometimes stand near the window of his room to greet them and listen to their recitals of misfortune and sorrow. Again, he would receive them right in his room. Many in need were given monetary help or presents of cloth or a blanket; never did he let such people depart empty-handed.

There was an octogenarian fisherman, Purna Haldar, who plied a dilapidated fishing craft on the Ganga, not far from the monastery. Feeble and bent with age, he had difficulty in making both ends meet, for most of the time his catch was poor, not worth enough to provide even a meagre living. The Swami was aware of all this, and as he watched the old man from the upstairs verandah of the monastery his heart would go out to him. Soon, in order to help him, he instructed the monk in

charge of the kitchen to take whatever catch the man might bring in, and to pay him handsomely. In addition, he now and then gave him presents of cloth and other things. Then the man suddenly died, and the Swami felt he had lost an old friend. To the widow, he sent as a gift a purse and some clothes with his condolences and blessings.

One noon at Belur, as the Swami was having his dinner in his room upstairs, he saw a cobbler mending shoes, seated under the mango tree of the monastery yard. After finishing dinner the Swami spoke to the attendant: "Ah! We all have had our meal, whereas this man (the cobbler) is drudging there with an empty stomach. Go and give him a good quantity of offered fruits and sweets."⁷ The attendant obeyed and on his return found the Swami standing by the window of his room with a half rupee in his hand, looking intently at the cobbler. The latter stopped work the moment he received the fruits and sweets and began eating. Quite touched by the spectacle the Swami remarked: "Ah! Did you notice this? The man must have been awfully hungry. That is why he began to eat right away. Stand here and watch. I am having a little fun."⁸ Saying this, he dropped the coin in front of the man, who looked up and understood the situation. Filled with great gratitude and joy, the man saluted the Swami again and again with folded hands and put the coin in his pocket. Later, finding a monk bargaining with the cobbler regarding the price for the work done, the Swami remonstrated with him, say-

⁷⁻⁸ *Shivananda Vani*, II

ing: "Ah! The man is poor. Why bargain with him?"⁹

In this world there is more sorrow than happiness; it is through sorrow that most men learn their lessons and gain purification of heart. Many came to Swami Shivananda, not because they wanted God but because they sought peace in an hour of bereavement. Once, a resident of Calcutta, a stranger, was brought to the monastery at Belur. So shaken and overwhelmed was he by the death of his wife that he had almost lost his mind. The Swami received him kindly and talked to him. By the serenity of his presence and gentle words of consolation he breathed peace into the man's soul, restored sanity to his distraught mind, and won him over to religion.

As head of the Order, Mahapurush was like a patriarch; he interested himself not merely in the spiritual well-being of the monks and devotees, but in their physical welfare also. He was much concerned if a monk was sick or a devotee failed to visit the monastery on the usual day. Not satisfied with making repeated inquiries, he would go out of his way to see that everything necessary was done. Very few, perhaps, of those for whom he was so anxious and solicitous realized the depth of his feelings until he had passed away.

An ascetic by nature, the Swami had always been very independent and self-reliant; his habits were simple and his wants few. Seldom would he allow anyone to serve him personally. A sincere and earnest disciple once wrote asking permission to

⁹ *Shivananda Vani*, II

render him some service of a personal nature. The Swami replied that he needed nothing, but that his heart would be gladdened if the disciple would direct his mind wholly to God, meditate upon Him, and try to realize Him. However, towards the end of his life, when he was suffering from old age, and infirmity, it became necessary for him to accept more freely the ministrations of others. The following conversation ¹⁰ illustrates this fact:

The Swami: "I have all kinds of complications now. Which shall I attend to? If I attend to one, another develops. If I try to remedy my cold, it affects my nerves. The body should not stay like this very long — and I am putting all of you to so much trouble."

Attendant: "No, Maharaj, you are surely no trouble to us. You are our father, mother — all. Now that your body is old, should we not serve you? It is a great blessing that we have the privilege of serving you a little."

The Swami: "I know very well you serve me out of love. But I feel I shouldn't drag on like this, always ailing. Everything depends on the will of the Master. His will be done under all conditions."

Attendant: "Maharaj, we did not see the Master. You are here, and it brings us great joy. You are a direct disciple of the Master. Is it a small privilege that we can be with you? Because of your presence, all of us — the sadhus, sannyasins and devotees — are happy....."

The Swami: "The Master is especially merciful to you. That is why he is making you serve his devotee (meaning himself). You are blessed; I too am blessed because I am with you. Who knows where I should have been, otherwise?"

¹⁰ *Shivananda Vani*, I

Of course, the Master is protecting us all the time.”

Once a devotee saluted the Swami and offered some money at his feet. To him the Swami said: “Why did you give me money? I have no need for it whatsoever. I am a monk. What shall I do with money? Through the grace of the Lord I do not have any wants. I am His servant. He graciously provides me with two pieces of bread.”¹¹ Saying this he sang the following song:

“O Lord, I am Thy servant, Thy devoted servant.
Thou art the Master, my beloved Master.
Two pieces of bread and a loin-cloth
I receive from Thee: I am happy.
Joyously I sing Thy name, Thy blessed name;
Give me love and devotion at Thy lotus feet.”¹²

“So long as He is supplying me bread and butter, what shall I do with the money? My child, take it. You are a householder. You need it more than I do.”¹³ As the devotee pressed him very much, the Swami finally accepted the money and asked the attendant to use it for the service of the Lord.

Regarding the love of Swami Shivananda, a devotee once said: “Nothing could escape his causeless, calculationless love; it equalized all, it heightened the lowest.”¹⁴ His love seemed perennial and inexhaustible; the more it was given, the more it increased. Even animals shared in his affection and care. At Belur one noticed how the Swami would at times give “the black dog” a special

¹¹⁻¹³ *Shivananda Vani*, I

¹⁴ Dhangopal Mukerji, a householder disciple, author of *Face of Silence* and other books.

dinner or bath, and how he would stand beside the monastery cows, affectionately stroking them. By his specific orders the cows had their treats of molasses, bananas and barley flour, and the Swami, seeing them eat heartily, was delighted.

According to the Sanskrit poet Bhavabhuti, great men possess seemingly opposite qualities of head and heart; they are more soft and tender than the flower, yet more firm and adamant than the thunderbolt! This truly describes Swami Shivananda. Though generous, kind and loving to a fault, he time and again created around himself such an atmosphere of insurmountable reserve and awe-inspiring majesty that no one dared approach or interrupt him. As an itinerant monk and ascetic he had been well known for these moods, and they persisted when he became head of the Order.

To understand a man of God, one must rise to his stature. It is only natural that his actions and reactions, his ways of life, may appear strange to the world; but if one can fathom his soul, everything in it is found meaningful. Viewed superficially his manifestations of temper, and so on, may seem to indicate lack of self-control, but they are like lines drawn on water; they in no way disturb the inner poise and serenity of his mind, and they are prompted by great love and consideration for the well-being of those at whom they are directed; they are blessings in disguise. When gentle words of suggestion, advice or persuasion fail to correct certain erring individuals, they have to be treated more severely; in that way they will grow. Though Mahapurush

as guru did not hesitate to be a stern disciplinarian, reproving those who needed it, he always acted with the best of motives: he had nothing but blessings in his heart for one and all.

Once an attendant was scolded for carelessness by the Swami. Disturbed and assailed with many doubts the man finally unburdened his mind to him. To allay his doubts the Swami observed, while his face beamed with love and sympathy: "My child, the Master was born for the good of the world. We too came with him and do not have any desire other than the good of people. Even in dreams we do not wish ill to anyone. You are with me constantly, caring for me. The Master has entrusted me with the responsibility of looking after you. That is why sometimes I have to correct your mistakes and transgressions. If I scold you or take you to task, it is all for your good. The temper I may show is all on the surface. In my heart I cherish nothing but love and compassion for you, otherwise why should I keep you here? Know this for certain that whatever I do is for your benefit, your correction. Sometimes feeling that a little harsh treatment may help in directing your mind and its tendencies Godward, I may take recourse to such an action, and I do it knowingly and not under the influence of anger. If you only knew how much I pray to the Master for your welfare, you would not have such doubts in your mind. Besides, as it is said, 'the anger of a sage is like a boon!' Know that it holds good in our case, too."¹⁵

Just as doctors can be classed according to their

¹⁵ *Shivananda Vani*, II

skill and efficiency, so also can spiritual teachers. Sri Ramakrishna said: "Doctors are either first class, second class or third class. The third-class doctor feels the pulse of the patient and advises him to take some drug. He then goes away and does not even inquire if the patient actually takes the medicine or not. The second-class doctor tries to convince his unwilling patient that he will benefit by the medicine, and he adopts all gentle means to induce him to take it. The first-class doctor, finding that his patient is determined not to take any medicine, does not hesitate to put his knee on his chest and force the medicine down his throat. In like manner, the guru who gives religious instruction to his disciple but takes no further notice of him is a guru of the third class. He who continues to be interested in the disciple is a guru of the second class. But he who, finding that his disciple does not properly listen to or follow his teachings, enforces obedience, is a guru of the first class."¹⁶

A devotee at Belur once asked the Swami to bless his young son, so that he would grow to be a good man. The Swami, of course, blessed the boy, but added, "You be good yourself. Then the son will be good."¹⁷ Occasionally, some of the devotees would pester the Swami with recitals of their so-called exalted spiritual experiences, which represented only vague, though heightened, workings of the imagination. Mahapurush would set them right, destroy any illusions they might have about their attainments. Saying that their experiences were,

¹⁶ *Words of the Master* compiled by Swami Brahmananda

¹⁷ *Shivananda Vani*, I

perhaps, a little better than bad dreams, he would caution them not to be conceited and would point out that the Goal was still far off.

At one time a certain monk, instead of going to the chapel for his early morning meditation, formed the habit of meditating, seated on his bed. The Swami, coming to know this, scolded him, saying: "Why on the bed? Get up early, wash yourself, and go to the chapel to meditate there. Why, of all places, do you meditate seated on the bed? That is not a good practice. Of course, there are exceptions when sitting elsewhere is inconvenient. But we have learned from experience that the moment you sit on the bed you feel lethargic and sleepy. The bed and its pillows have a tendency to pull you down and induce sleep. If possible, I try to avoid sitting on the bed. At the early hour of dawn, when the chapel is not open, I may sit for a while on the bed, but later I go to the chapel and enjoy my meditation there."¹⁸

To encourage the monk the Swami then recounted reminiscences of the early days with Sri-Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar:

"We noticed that the Master would not sleep at all after three o'clock in the morning. He was in the habit of sleeping lightly — an hour or two sufficed him. Arising from bed, he started taking the name of the Lord. Sometimes he chanted Om, sometimes he clapped his hands and repeated the name of the Mother, or perhaps he walked up and down taking the name of God. He would awaken those of us who were sleeping in his room. Approaching us one by one, he would

¹⁸ *Shivananda Vani*, I

say: 'My boys, are you awake? Get up and take the name of the Lord!' His ecstatic chanting of God's name was going on all the time. Having no consciousness of the outer world, he would, while chanting, occasionally go out on the adjoining porch."¹⁹

We have noted that Swami Shivananda was very regular in his spiritual practice—an object lesson to the younger generation of monks. Morning and evening, as long as physically able, he would go to the chapel for meditation, and it was very seldom that he broke this routine. When his body became feeble and he could no longer walk to the chapel, he kept up his meditation punctually in his own room. Eventually the doctors advised him not to meditate too much, but in spite of all cautioning he continued his routine, to the dismay of the devotees.

An attendant once took courage to ask: "Maharaj, why need you meditate so much? You can see the Lord and talk to Him with your eyes open." Melting with affection, the Swami replied:

"Yes, my child, you have spoken rightly. Without any effort on my part, the Lord graciously appears to me and if necessary speaks to me... I do not meditate for that reason, but for this: Many have had initiation from me, but not all can keep up their spiritual practices. There are still others who, although they keep up their practices, do not make much headway, because of certain obstructions in their lives. For them I have to pray separately. When I concentrate a little, their faces flash across my mind and I pray for them individually. I have to remove the obstructions that stand in the way of their spiri-

¹⁹ *Shivananda Vani*, II

tual progress. Besides, in the world many have trials and tribulations: I have to help them also. It is the Lord who inspires me from within, to do these things. In the world there is no end to troubles. Consequently, my only prayer is that there may be peace everywhere, with a lessening of pain and sorrow, and that men may advance towards God. I do not perform spiritual practices for myself, my child.”²⁰

A prince among monks, realizing fully the vanity of this world, and living in the highest God-consciousness, Mahapurush constantly reminded the monks of the supreme purpose of life. He told them about their great responsibilities and explained how best to avoid the traps and pitfalls on their paths. He would say that it is not enough to renounce hearth and home, donning the ochre cloth — the badge of renunciation — and posing as teachers of men. True monks must be imbued with the genuine spirit of monasticism and never deviate from the highest ideals. So-called monks are plentiful. As a matter of fact, thousands of them belonging to different sects and orders roam the sub-continent of India. Many of these are just parasites that live upon society and do no good to anyone.

A young religious aspirant wrote to the Swami pleading for the final monastic initiation. After a period of active service in a Himalayan centre, this young man had gone to Benares, where he was devoting himself exclusively to spiritual practice, including solitary meditation. The Swami wrote to him: “You desire to take the monastic vow. Well and good! If it be the will of the Lord and if I

²⁰ *Shivananda Vani*, I

happen to be at the Math, the ceremony can take place on the Holy Mother's birthday . . . Accept my hearty love and blessing. I pray to Him that you may advance in the realm of the Spirit. The ritual of sannyas is only an external form. May you realise Him in your heart and fulfil the purpose of human life! Of the thousands of monks wandering over India, it is doubtful if more than a fraction have attained knowledge. We have grown old and have had enough experience in these matters. You come from a respectable family of Bengal and are educated. It is not desirable that you should have superficial ideas. What more shall I say? May the Lord grant you the right understanding!" (An unpublished letter)

At the Belur Monastery a newly ordained sannyasin approached Mahapurush for his blessings.²¹ Wanting to know the ideals of monasticism and their implications, he asked the Swami: "Maharaj, please tell us what we should observe as monks. While conducting works of service it is not practicable to abide by the orthodox monastic rules mentioned in the Paramahansa and Narayana Upanishads."

The Swami replied: "Yes, there are many monastic rules of the kind you mention, but since they are not meant for you it is unnecessary that you observe them. You represent a different type of monks, a combination of karma-yogins and sannyasins. Swamiji has left a new ideal for you. In addition to your spiritual practice you are expected dispassionately to carry on activities

²¹ The incident and conversation that follows are mentioned in *Shivananda Vani*, I

conducive to spirituality. Literal observance of the rules you speak of is not practical for you. Such rules are meant for sannyasins who believe in no activity other than exclusive contemplation, self-analysis and discrimination. But you know, my child, if one is true in the essentials, the rest will take care of itself."

Swami Shivananda then stated what the essentials are: "Renunciation of lust and of gold! If you can renounce lust of the flesh and greed for wealth, everything will be all right Above everything, a monk should observe the vow of chastity and poverty." Again, he said: "You are expected to live the Master's commandments and pursue the path he chalked out. . . . Purity and guilelessness should be your watchwords. The Master forgives all failings except hypocrisy and self-deception. Those who play false and take to hypocritical ways do not belong here. The Master does not allow them to remain in the Order; he removes them. Only those who are genuine can stay."

The life of a monk is like a white garment. In a monk the slightest blemish, negligible in others, becomes conspicuous and inexcusable. Dedicated to God, he stands for the highest Ideal. He should always aim high and try to live up to the highest ethical and spiritual standards. While discussing the ideal of monasticism, the Swami one day presented a pattern which a monk would do well to follow. He said: "A monk should get up very early in the morning. He should not sleep after three or four in the morning. We noticed that

Sri Ramakrishna would not sleep after that hour, but would take the name of the Lord. A sadhu should bathe early and then practise meditation. He should not eat immediately after his bath. It is all right if others break this rule, but a monk should not. His appearance, speech and all should be of a different order, beautiful and divine. Why should he possess money? He should be wholly resigned to God, knowing that He will look after him. A monk should be neat and tidy but not foppish. Foppishness is not becoming to one who treads the path of renunciation. A monk should eat sparingly at night. The Master used to say that the supper should be just a snack. A monk should not be ignorant; he should study and cultivate his mind. He should try to keep physically well and fit. Calm and poised, he should be soft-spoken and courteous. He should always avoid 'lust and gold', having nothing to do with them."²²

Sometimes, certain monks of the Order felt a great desire to live an itinerant life, visiting holy places, eating only chance morsels of food, and practising austerity. There is justification for such a course; followed for a period of time it may foster resignation, adaptability, self-reliance. We have seen that Mahapurush himself, fascinated by the freedom and joy of the wandering monk, preferred to be one for many years. But knowing the dangers of such a life, he would always caution monks who did not have sufficient strength of mind, discrimination and dispassion. He would say: "Even as a

²² *Shivananda Vani, I*

rolling stone gathers no moss, aimless wandering, by itself, cannot be beneficial in the spiritual realm, nor can it help one towards God-realization. . . . And where would you go, and why? The Lord is within.”²³ In order to drive home this idea the Swami then sang the following song:

“ Stay by thyself, O my mind!
 Why wander here and there?
 Look within! In the inner chamber of thy heart
 Thou wilt find whatever thou wishest.
 He, the invaluable Philosopher’s Stone,
 Can fulfil thy most cherished desires.
 Thou knowest not, O my mind,
 What treasures lie strewn
 At the entrance of the mansion of the Lord!”²⁴

Spiritual progress is generally slow and difficult, like climbing a steep mountain. In order to reach the far-off Goal one must be armed with great patience and perseverance as well as dauntless faith. Then alone is one able to avoid or overcome the many trails and temptations on the way. Monks and devotees, depressed and discouraged by the apparently meagre returns of their spiritual practices, often approached the Swami, seeking his help and guidance. Always, of course, he encouraged and spurred them on. He was wont to say: “Do not worry. You are certainly making headway, although you are not aware of this. It is for you to carry on without looking for results. A person sincerely pursuing something good never comes to grief.”²⁵

One day a monk in a tone of pessimism said to the Swami: “Maharaj, my body is becoming

^{23, 25} *Shivananda Vani*, II

²⁴ A Song of Ramprasad

feeble; I cannot perform spiritual practices as formerly. Thinking of what may happen, I am frightened." The Swami answered, "Cry! Cry! Can He be realized through practice? How much power has man? What can he do to become worthy of the grace of God? Nothing at all. Be at peace, surrendering yourself unto Him. Take refuge in Him. He will certainly accept you at His feet. It is impossible to realize God without His grace."²⁶ In saying these words the Swami certainly did not mean emphasizing the importance of divine grace. When God is gracious, all difficulties are resolved and one feels like calling upon Him, like meditating upon Him. There is no doubt that spiritual practice, done in the right spirit, purifies the mind and opens the way to divine grace, which is the ultimate thing, above all else, needed for God-realization. When a person is incapable of doing any spiritual practice worthy of the name, he has no alternative to being resigned to God. With perfect resignation will come grace, and the vision of God.

On another occasion the Swami said to some monks: "As a dog never leaves his master's home to go elsewhere, whether he is fed or not, whether his master beats him or is kind, in the same way one must be completely resigned to the Lord. He who can take refuge at His feet, and remain resigned under all conditions and circumstances to the last, will indeed obtain divine grace. You have no reason to worry, because you have taken refuge in Sri Ramakrishna and found shelter in his Order....

²⁶ *Shivananda Vani, I*

Know for certain that the Master will save you so long as you remain in his Order.”²⁷

As head of a religious organization with a large following, both lay and monastic, the Swami was the recipient of much honour. Countless men and women in search of Truth looked up to him for inspiration and guidance. Many took every word that fell from his lips as coming from God. They depended upon him and worshipped him. But the Swami remained the same “Great Soul” — absolutely detached and dispassionate, calm and serene. Adoration or adulation never touched him; considering himself merely an instrument of Sri Ramakrishna, he was always very humble. He used to say: “It is the Master who makes me do all these things. I have neither scholarship nor the gift of speech nor anything else. Old and feeble of body, I cannot even go downstairs, yet he is managing his work. When I hear that through me others are benefited, it gives me great joy. How many people come! I can hardly speak to all, there are so many. They say, ‘You don’t have to speak: if we just see you, our afflictions are assuaged and doubts vanish.’ Victory to Thee, O Lord! Blessed be Thy name!”²⁸ It was, he insisted, the Master dwelling in his heart that attracted people like a magnet: it was the Master who talked to them about God and spirituality and helped them. True man of God that he was, Mahapurush constantly thought about Him, took His name and sang His glory. Humble as a blade of grass and patient as a tree, he honoured all men but claimed no attention for himself.

Truth is very profound, subtler than the subtlest, greater than the greatest. It is beyond the reach of the senses and mind. The path to It is as precarious and dangerous as the sharp edge of a razor. "Strait is the gate and narrow the way." Because of their many incipient desires, most men make a travesty of the Ideal, caricaturing and lowering it, allowing all kinds of compromises. Naturally, they become sidetracked and miss the Goal. "Even to hear of It is not granted to many: many even, having heard of It, cannot comprehend. Wonderful is he who comprehends It as taught by an able preceptor."²⁹

The life stories of illumined souls, their experiences and realizations, represent Truth made manifest. Though one may draw inspiration and benefit from books, there is the danger of getting lost in the maze of words, doctrines and dogmas. Thus it is that living contact with a man of God is very important and necessary for the realization of God. The light that is dormant in the seeker can be made to blaze forth in full splendour only by one who is himself illumined. Swami Shivananda was indeed a flaming torch of knowledge, an awakener of souls. In an exalted mood the Swami once said to a monk of the Order: "What kind of scriptures are you reading? Can you read our lives? Our lives are the Upanishads. You will find in them the essence of the scriptures."³⁰

²⁹ *Katha Upanishad*

³⁰ *Shivananda Vani, II*

CHAPTER X

THE LIFE THAT WAS A DIVINE SYMPHONY

Since a monk is dedicated to the purpose of realizing God, the monastery is his rightful place; it protects him and provides a suitable environment; he draws his sustenance from prayer and meditation. Even as a fish dies when taken from water, a monk who leaves his monastery and neglects his devotions runs the risk of falling from the ideal, which means virtually his spiritual death.

Mahapurush often emphasized this point to the monks of the Order. He had great love for the monastery at Belur, looking upon it as the most sacred of places, vibrant with spirituality, where the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna and his great disciples is visibly present. In an exalted mood he once remarked, "This place is verily Vaikuntha (the heaven of the Lord Vishnu)!... How much spiritual rapture and ecstasy have been experienced here!... How many people will come from even distant countries to worship the ground of the Belur Math!"¹ To be privileged to live at the math is like living in a fort, impervious to the sordidness and distraction of the world. There one, indeed, opens oneself to the holiest of influences. The Swami told everybody to take full advantage of the monastery's spiritual atmosphere.

¹ *Shivananda Vani*, I

Addressing a monk, he one day said:

“Now that you are at Belur, practise japa and meditation. Do it intensively—early in the morning, at dusk and at midnight. . . . Swamiji brought the relics of the Master and installed them here. In this place there is a special manifestation of Sri Ramakrishna. Besides, Swamiji, Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda), Baburam Maharaj (Swami Premananda), and others performed so much spiritual practice here..! Nowhere will you find another place more favourable for spiritual practice. . . . During the days you live here be sure to enjoy the bliss of meditation. The more you meditate the more you will appreciate the holiness of Belur. You are a devotee of the Lord. Call upon Him. You will certainly get a response and your heart will be filled with joy”²

How did the Swami live his life from day to day at Belur? Every moment of it was exalted—given to God. Viewed as a whole, it was like a superbly rich spiritual fabric, bright with many colours and patterns; or some might prefer to call it a divine symphony, immeasurably strong, sweet and melodious. The Indian scriptures say that God dwells more manifestly in an illumined soul, and through it performs His work of spiritual ministrations. This was literally true in the case of Swami Shivananda. At Belur, from early morning till late at night, his was a life of ceaseless prayer, meditation and ecstasy, as well as of consecrated service. By every act and speech he radiated divine presence and power. He was a constant source of inspiration and upliftment. His revelations concerning God and spiritual life were numberless.

² *Shivananda Vani*, I

In the early days of the Order, when the Math and Mission were being organized, Swami Vivekananda, in consultation with his brother disciples, had laid down certain simple, broad rules for the Order's regulation and guidance. Of the many rules, one related to the regularity of spiritual practice. Novices and monks were required to go to the shrine and sit for meditation at stated hours, morning and evening. A bell was rung announcing the hours. The immediate consequence, as generally happens in such cases, had not been quite satisfactory. Swami Shivananda, among others, had failed to get up at the required time in the morning. It is, of course, easy to understand why: having patterned their lives upon that of the Master, Mahapurush and other direct disciples felt that mechanical adherence to rules was unnecessary for them. Their one pre-occupation was God, their lives being spontaneous outpourings of love and devotion—one continuous prayer and meditation, whether they adhered to rules or not. But Swamiji noticed the breach and irregularity, and one day said to Mahapurush, "Brother, it is true you need not comply with the rules for your own sake, but as an example to younger monks you should." From that time on, Mahapurush took Swamiji literally and tried to abide by every rule he had laid down.

Exactly at the hours of dawn and of dusk, one would invariably find the Swami in the shrine, meditating. His meditation was not just a mechanical routine; unaware of the passage of time, he would be wrapt in the thought of God, his

mind soaring in the etherial heights of indescribable blessedness. His presence in the shrine always lent an air of exaltation. Then, as his mind came down to the normal plane, he would leave his seat and go to his own room, the intoxication of meditation still evident in his looks. Absorbed in his own thought, he would sometimes hum devotional songs or perhaps chant hymns to himself.

After the morning meditation the Swami passed a busy, crowded day. As he seated himself serenely in his room, the monks and novices, according to their usual custom, would drop in and offer salutations. He greeted all affectionately, inquiring about their physical and spiritual welfare. He heard the reports of the different activities of the math and of the branch centres. He discussed the progress of various departments of work and of plans for their future. For instance, the monk in charge of the monastery clinic, conducted for the benefit of the local public, might report his work, stating at length the number of patients treated, the nature and kind of ailments dealt with, and so on. The manager of the monastery kitchen might come and talk over the foods to be prepared, the menus of meals, the special fruits and sweets brought in by devotees for offering, and how to dispose of them. Mahapurush patiently listened to all these and other recitals, and gave his suggestions and advice.

At this time many devotees and visitors also visited the math, seeking the Swami's presence and blessings. He received them all kindly and talked to them informally about life in general, or about God and spirituality. Sometimes his room was

filled to overflowing with people—a mixed crowd, some seated on the floor, others standing. Even while the guests still lingered and the conversation went on, the Swami would have his light breakfast. Gradually, as the crowd dispersed, those who had special problems or questions, personal or otherwise, met the Swami and talked to him privately.

Finally, when all were gone the Swami could have a breathing spell or be free to perform other duties, such as attending to his mail, or he might read. As head of a large religious order with a growing spiritual family, he received all kinds of letters, many of which sought his counsel. In the early days he himself handled his correspondence; but as health failed and the volume of letters increased, he merely dictated the letters, depending beyond that on his secretary. His reading was more or less only a diversion, since he had realized God, the source of all knowledge. In the morning he might, perhaps, glance at the pages of a newspaper to keep abreast of world news, or peruse articles from current magazines. For the most part, however, he read sacred texts, a fair number of which were always on his desk. Sometimes, instead of reading himself his favourite hymns and chants, he would ask his attendant to read them.

When it was convenient and he felt strong enough, the Swami took a little walk for fresh air. On his way back he sometimes went on a tour of inspection over the entire monastery grounds. During this tour he saw and talked to novices and monks engaged in different duties, observed the cows and other animals, looked at the flowers and

vegetables in the garden, and noted the progress of the activities of the institution. This tour formed one of his most pleasant daily duties, and whenever possible he never omitted it. Often, spiritual aspirants from different parts of India arrived at the math seeking initiation. It was usually early in the morning or in the forenoon that the Swami gave initiation, sometimes to quite a number of people.

Soon after the morning worship, around noon, the Swami took his main meal or dinner, which was frugal, consisting of a little rice, boiled vegetables or soup. As will be remembered, it was after returning from Amarnath in his early years, when he suffered a severe attack of dysentery, that he had become strict regarding his diet. The severe regimen was followed to his last days. He never believed in eating to please the palate, hence seldom had delicacies; he ate just in order to live.

Once in the course of dinner the Swami said: "I like rice and vegetables plain. That satisfies me. These dishes you see here I eat as medicine.... As a matter of fact, eating is just like taking medicine."³ Quoting Shankara he then remarked: "The sickness of hunger should be doctored.... Hunger is a kind of ailment. Just as medicine relieves sickness, so food alleviates hunger. One should bear this in mind while eating.... The Atman is free from hunger and similar limitations. It is pure intelligence, unaffected by anything. Hunger, thirst and so on are characteristics of the body and not of the Atman."⁴ Again he said: "I eat only to sustain the body so that it will last

³⁻⁴ *Shivananda Vani*, I

for a while, and I can go on thinking of God.”⁵

When sweets and delicacies were served to the Swami he usually shared them with those around him, or he would leave most of them for his attendant or disciples. After dinner he tried to be alone and rest a little. Around two or three in the afternoon, he would again be busy receiving monks, devotees and visitors—large numbers of them—and this would continue for several hours.

The evening service conducted at the shrine of the Belur Math was always imposing and uplifting, and the presence of Mahapurush added to its unusual solemnity and spiritual atmosphere. In his diary a monk of the Order thus described the service: “Evening descended on a hushed world. The bells and gongs of the Belur monastery commenced to chime, announcing the hour of evening service. When the monks and devotees started going to the shrine, Swami Shivananda also went. After bowing before the altar he sat in the south-east corner of the shrine, his hands folded, his eyes indrawn. The evening service began. Its solemn music and the serene presence of the Swami helped the concentration of everyone there. The offering of lights was followed by the singing of hymns, in which the Swami joined. Then one by one the monks moved to their respective seats for meditation. Swami Shivananda closed his eyes and became absorbed, his peaceful face bespeaking the depth of his meditation.”⁶ Visitors, even strangers with spiritual susceptibilities, who had the

⁵⁻⁶ *Shivananda Vani*, I

blessed privilege of attending this service during the days when Mahapurush or other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were living, bore testimony to the fact that the evening service at Belur is, indeed, a sight for the gods, that to be at the math at this hour of worship is like being in heaven.

The evening service and meditation over, there was again an opportunity for some of the monks and devotees to visit the Swami and offer salutation. At this time he was to be found in his room. The conversation invariably turned on God and deep problems of spiritual life and experience. After supper, as a rule, the Swami saw no one but the attendant who cared for him. In the silence of his room, all by himself, he appeared an altogether different person. Beaming with spirituality and joy, he was likely to sing in his soul-stirring voice devotional songs or to chant hymns. Perhaps, his rosary in hand, he would do japā and commune with God until bedtime.

The account of the Swami's day-to-day life at Belur seems incomplete without speaking, more at length, of the visitors and spiritual aspirants who sought out the monastery and met this great soul, and of the interviews, or even initiations which the Swami granted to many people. The visitors were of various types. Those who were quiet, sincere, and earnest were fascinated by the air of spirituality at Belur. Having no doubts in their minds, they sat reverently at the Swami's feet, enjoying in silence his serene, holy presence. Certain visitors, curious and sceptical, viewed the Order and its activities critically; but after meeting the Swami and

talking with him for a while, these usually changed their attitudes and went away impressed. Still other visitors, academic and argumentative, looked at everything with the eye of reason and plied the Swami with endless questions. Eager to help all, he would treat each one differently, according to his individual requirements. But always he brought to them his great love and wisdom.

The many interviews and talks which the Swami was called upon to give every day meant much strain on his feeble body. Sometimes, in consideration of his health, interviews had to be restricted or stopped altogether. On one occasion two young workers belonging to a well-known organization of Bengal came to the math with the express purpose of seeing him and pleading earnestly for an interview. After long deliberation by the monks, these young men were finally conducted into the Swami's presence. They wanted to know about Sri Ramakrishna, his mission, how he grouped his disciples together, what kind of training he gave them, and so on. The conversation⁷ that followed is here quoted in part:

Question: "God manifested Himself as Sri Ramakrishna for the good of the world. While Sri Ramakrishna was living in the flesh he laid the foundation for an Order consisting of his intimate disciples, to whom he transmitted the power he had acquired by lifelong spiritual practice. That Order is still going on. Please tell us how he organized his disciples. By what tie did he bind them together?"

⁷ *Shivananda Vani*, I

The Swami: "Love alone was the tie by which he held all of us together. We came to him drawn and fascinated by his love, and little by little we formed a group. His love for us was so great that in comparison with it the love of parents and relatives seemed trivial. Even now his Order is being conducted by love. Here love alone is the cord that binds all of us together."

Question: "That love by which the Master gathered you together, and which he transmitted to you, is diminishing and will continue to diminish with the passing of time. How can it be preserved intact? By what means can the stream of love be kept flowing unimpeded for a long time, for the good of the world?"

The Swami: "Look here, in this transient world nothing is permanent. No force whatsoever is uniformly effective for good.... How will man know how to keep this force intact? Only the Mother knows. The Supreme Energy from whom originated the forces in the world—She alone knows how to keep intact this force of love. Mahamaya, the primordial Energy, who manifests Herself for the good of the world—She alone knows in what way and for how long She will keep this force active. We, for our part, have no alternative but to depend wholly upon Her."

Question: "We have made Sri Ramakrishna our life's ideal and are trying to shape our lives according to his ideas. We pray for your help in this matter. You are one of Sri Ramakrishna's foremost disciples. Please give us some light."

The Swami: "My boys, you are blessed that you have made Sri Ramakrishna your life's ideal.... I bless you with all my heart that you may gain in strength and become even more blessed. May you attain the consummation of your life's ideal. The light you refer to will

come from within. The more you try to enter within, reaching the inner and inmost recesses of your heart, the greater the light you will receive. . . . The Mother, the Embodiment of Light, is within every heart. She is within me: She is within you. She is everywhere, in everything, from Brahma down to the smallest insect—in the movable and the immovable. Pray to Mahamaya, the First-born. She holds the key in Her hands. The realm of light will be opened unto you if She graciously unlocks the door. . . . She alone is the source of the entire universe. We have all come from that Mother and will eventually merge in Her again. . . .

“That Primordial Energy, the power of Brahman, is beyond the reach of this mind and intellect of ours. She manifests Herself in a pure mind. Man cannot reach or understand Her through spiritual practice alone. She is self-luminous—it is Her consciousness that makes this world conscious. . . . Hold on to that Mother! She is within yourself. It is She who will open the way to the light.”

Question: “Please tell us a little of what you learned by your lifelong spiritual practice, and open the way to light by blessing us.”

The Swami: “I told you, my boys, this light is within yourself. Dive deep within and you will discover the light. . . . That is the essence of all teachings. Be resigned unto the Mother. Pray to Her earnestly, crying like a child, and you will discover the light. . . . You will see that the blissful Mother will give you joy and peace. She will certainly do so.”

Question: “In ‘Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prasangā’ by Swami Saradananda we have read that the Master attained the state of supreme knowledge called nirvikalpa samadhi by tremendous spiritual discipline. After he had reached

that state and was doing works of spiritual ministrations in accordance with the injunctions of the Divine Mother; by Her specific command he kept his wife by his side. Just as he initiated and gave necessary training to his other intimate disciples, he initiated his wife and trained her also, so that she could be firmly established in spiritual understanding. That the Master associated with his devotees and kept his wife by his side—what does that indicate? Did he not by this act point out the trend and pattern of the life of future generations?"

The Swami: "Yes, when Holy Mother came to Dakshineswar the Master kept her by his side, gave her advice on spiritual matters and encouraged and helped her in every way, with great care. But the Master did so after attaining nirvikalpa samadhi. You will understand the point if you hear what the Master told us. He said, 'The Mother who is there in the temple—the same Mother is within this (referring to his own body). Again, it is the same Mother in the form of my wife who is with me here.' We never wished nor tried to understand why the Master acted that way. . . . Swamiji was such a genius! Yet even he—not to speak of us—did not try to understand the doings of the Master."

Question: "Maharaj, will you please bless us, that we too may have that faith and devotion, that we may have peace in our lives?"

The Swami: "Yes, my boys, I bless you indeed. May you grow in knowledge, may you live in peace, and may you promote the national welfare to the best of your ability!" Closing his eyes, he added, "I sincerely pray for you. May you make progress! May you make headway towards God!"

After the interview the two devotees saluted Swami Shivananda again and again and bade him

good-bye. The expression on their faces indicated that they were wholly satisfied.

The monks and novices of the Order had always free access to the Swami's room. They approached him as children would their parents, with their many problems, questions and difficulties. With infinite patience he talked with them and helped them.

For instance,⁸ a monk, very earnest and sincere, asked the Swami: "Maharaj, I want to realize God in His universal form and see Him in all beings. Please tell me how to do it." The Swami replied: "My child, you will have to see God in your own heart first. How can you see Him outside unless you see Him within first? When one is established in the inner realization, one can see Him everywhere—within as well as without. Then one attains the state as described in the line—'The universe is pervaded by Brahman.'" The monk rejoined: "What you say is true, but can one attain that state by developing such moral qualities as love, fortitude, self-control and so on?" The Swami replied: "Yes, a strict ethical life purifies the mind, and spiritual ideas flash across a mind that is pure. But I do not think that one can realize God by simply living a good moral life."

He continued: "God graciously reveals Himself in the heart of a devotee who always meditates upon Him. What is needed is meditation—constant remembrance and thinking of Him. Man attains God, who is existence, knowledge and bliss absolute, by constantly thinking about the true,

⁸ *Shivananda Vani*, II

omnipresent, all-loving, omnipotent and all-conscious Lord. Everything is accomplished if a person succeeds in installing Him in his heart. Then special efforts at moral perfection are unnecessary. Then he spontaneously expresses qualities like truthfulness, compassion and so on. The Master used to say that the child whom the father holds by the hand has no danger of falling. The essence of all, my child, is grace—grace. Man can realize Him if He graciously reveals Himself. Moral and spiritual discipline is helpful in directing the mind Godward. That is all.” Saying this the Swami sang the following song:

“ Who can see Thee unless Thou revealest
Thyself?

Will the heart be ever drawn to Thee unless
Thou callest?

Thou art the All-in-all, greater than the
greatest;

Thou art incomprehensible, infinite and
endless.

Who can hold Thee in meditation, O Lord?

I tell myself, Thou art beyond speech and mind,

And yet my heart is restless—wants to see Thee.

Assuage my sorrow by appearing to this wretch,

O Thou, who comest to the rescue of those in
distress.

O Thou, bring peace to my restless soul.”

The Swami sang this song with great feeling and then added, “ The Master used to say: ‘ The breeze of His grace is always blowing. Take advantage of it by unfurling the sails.’ By ‘ unfurling the sails ’ is meant self-effort and spiritual discipline. Spiritual discipline will prepare the mind for divine grace.”

In the West the progress of science has brought many material advantages, comforts and amenities of life. As a result the people seem to be happier there than in India. One day that was the trend of conversation⁹ amongst the monks and devotees who gathered at the Swami's room.

To this the Swami remarked: "Happiness of this sort is short-lived. It is not worthwhile. People over there are infatuated by the evanescent pleasures of this world, because they have not tasted the bliss of divine communion. My children, whatever you may say, there is no joy in 'lust and gold', here or in heaven, whether you are scholarly or otherwise. This is the word of God. The Chhandogya Upanishad also states: 'That which is infinite is bliss; there is no joy in the finite. The Infinite alone is blissful. Inquire about the Infinite.' True happiness is in the Absolute. One must know That. Science has failed to fathom It. Science is concerned with matter—phenomena. The desire to enjoy grows from day to day if one is engrossed in material things. They cannot bring satisfaction and peace. The seed of unrest is imbedded in enjoyment of this kind."

The Swami then quoted a verse from the Vishnupurana of which the purport is the same. He continued: "The not-Self cannot give peace. In Self-realization alone is peace. One must look for this peace within and not outside. Illumination, love and devotion, and similar states belong to the realm of the Spirit. Continue your spiritual

⁹ *Shivananda Vani*, II

practice, call upon God, my children. He will bestow upon you this inner peace."

In the beginning of 1931, a very interesting incident¹⁰ happened—an event that illustrates the Swami's spirit of renunciation and sense of values. We cannot resist the temptation of recounting it here. A lady devotee, a stranger, evidently of considerable means, brought to Belur a complete set of expensive silver utensils and offered them for use in the shrine. This was brought to the Swami's notice and he was at first extremely reluctant to accept them, saying: "Our Master couldn't bear the touch of coins, and for that matter, of any metal ware. He doesn't need them. Besides we are monks. What shall we do with all these expensive things?" But as the devotee with tears in her eyes pleaded importunately, they were finally accepted. The many monks and devotees present on the occasion were, of course, very happy that the utensils were kept. Mahapurushji's reaction was quite different, and he observed: "All right! Take them and use them for worship at the shrine. Personally, in my heart of hearts I do not feel like keeping them. Sri Ramakrishna was the greatest of monks, embodying the highest ideal of renunciation. He would have no use for silver, gold and diamonds—wealth of this type does not befit his character. Furthermore, the more we have things of that sort, the more troubles we shall have, tempting thieves and robbers. That's how big temples have amassed untold riches. The Master stood for something quite different. Would our

¹⁰ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

monastery that bears his name follow the beaten track and be in a rut? The more material prosperity we have, the less there will be of treasures that count in spiritual life—the spirit of dispassion and discrimination, austerity and discipline. Then we shall be busy in safe-guarding and protecting, needing a gate keeper and guard, lock and key, and so on. It will mean so much botheration, will it not?” The Swami seemed to be rather worried and unhappy that day, and his apprehensions were right. It was not long before a burglar broke open the shrine and took away all those expensive silver utensils and also the talisman that the Master used to wear around his arm—the talisman that had been preserved and worshipped as a precious relic. The Swami then remarked: “I told you at the time. All these things do not belong here—they are not for the Master. The water brought in by the floodtide disappeared as water under the bridge. Even the Master’s talisman was stolen.”

It has been mentioned that the number of persons who came for initiation to the Swami was large. He could refuse no one. This work of initiation was to tell upon his health, aggravating his condition. Much concerned, a monk of the Order once asked, “Did you initiate some people today also?” Mahapurush replied, “Yes, I have given them the name of the Lord.” The monk then took issue with the Swami, saying, “Your body is in such a bad state; it will be worse if you give initiations.” In answer the Swami said: “Tell me, what can I do? When people earnestly ask for initiation, I cannot refuse them. I cannot control

myself when I see their earnestness. As long as the body lives it will have its pleasures and pains, and it will certainly perish some day. Therefore, so long as it is permitted to live, let it do something for the good of people. It is all right if this body perishes while doing good to others. It is enough compensation if a single soul is helped by this body.”¹¹

Once a devotee,¹² very sincere and earnest, travelled all the way to Belur from his home in far-off Sind, and approached Mahapurush, begging for spiritual help. It so happened that the devotee had received a mantra in a dream, but not knowing how to evaluate this experience, he had grown restless, and finally came to the monastery. The Swami felt instinctively drawn toward the man, and being impressed by his genuine devotion, gave him initiation. After the ceremony, which as usual took place in the shrine, the Swami returned to his room. He seemed to be in a deep spiritual mood; his face was suffused with emotion, and as he walked about the room clapping his hands, he recited this couplet of Kabir¹³ : “When one finds an illumined teacher who can tell the difference between the real and the unreal and can give the knowledge of God, it is as if fire entered into the charcoal and the charcoal lost its blackness.”

In the meantime, the initiated disciple meditated for a while in the vestibule of the shrine and then came to the Swami’s room. After prostrating

¹¹ *Shivananda Vani*, II

¹² Incident adapted from *Shivananda Vani*, II

¹³ A poet-saint of India

himself at the guru's feet, the disciple sat on the floor and with folded hands and tearful eyes said: "Through your grace I have found peace in my heart. My mind had been restive. I could not quiet it—I was almost mad. But today finding that the mantra you have given me is identical with the one I received in dream, I am convinced that my dream experience was true and that it was you yourself who appeared to me in dream."

The Swami said in reply: "My son, it is the Master who has showered his grace on you, in order to grant you refuge at his blessed feet.... The scriptures say that when an illumined teacher initiates a disciple it is the Lord Himself who, having appeared in the heart of the teacher, communicates power into the heart of the disciple. The teacher is God Himself. Man can never be the teacher. Today I have dedicated you at Sri Ramakrishna's feet. Henceforth he will carry all your burdens, whether in this life or in the life to come."

Devotee: "Maharaj, I am not able to see the Master. I feel that it is you who have shown me mercy."

The Swami: "You may think so, but I know that it is the Master who has bestowed his grace on you. From today you belong to him. Henceforth, try to hold on to him firmly. Consider him your very own. This world is evanescent. Relationships with father, mother, wife, son, daughter and other relatives—all are bred of ignorance and last only a few days. But our relationship with the Lord is eternal; it is not destroyed with the death of the body. The living seed that has been sown in your heart today, being watered daily with love and devotion, will become a giant nectar-bearing tree and sweeten your life; it

will yield 'fruit fourfold.'¹⁴ All your desires will be fulfilled."

Devotee: "I am a householder, deluded by the power of maya, bound by different kinds of bondage. Please bless me that sunk in the depths of worldliness I do not forget your blessed feet. Please tell me how to live in the world so that I may not be altogether lost in it. You must save me, in whatever way you can."

As the devotee, flushed with spiritual emotion, clasped the Swami's feet and began saluting him again and again, the Swami was deeply touched. Quoting Sri Ramakrishna, he said among other things:

"My son, you have asked me how you should live in the world. About this, the Master himself said that while performing duties in the world one should keep one's mind in God. Therefore, while living in the world you should be detached from it, even as a maidservant does all kinds of work in the house of a rich man, although her whole heart is in her home in the country. Serve your wife, children and relatives, but know in the depths of your being that the only one who is your very own is the Lord. There is none else who is really your own. That does not mean that you are to neglect your wife and children. Instead, serve them, knowing that they were brought to you by the Lord Himself. Talk with them about God, and try to direct their minds to Him. Live in the world, but do not allow the mind to become bound to it.... Do not allow high worldly ambitions any place in your mind. You have the means of maintaining yourself modestly; be content with that.

¹⁴ Called the group of four values of life, viz., righteousness, wealth, pleasure and emancipation.

The mind tends to go downward—toward lust and gold, name and fame. This scattered mind will have to be gathered together and made to lose itself at the lotus feet of the Lord. The highest ambition in life is God-realization.”

Later, the Swami in the course of conversation said to his attendant: “Ah, this man is extremely devotional! The Master is especially gracious to him, otherwise he could not have such deep devotion. One can understand, at the time of initiation, how spiritually competent the disciple is. Those who are far advanced lose outer consciousness as soon as they receive the mantra. They shed tears; there is horripilation and trembling; and simultaneously the kundalini (the dormant spiritual energy) awakes, plunging them into meditation. I found this devotee to be of that nature. . . . What tears of love he shed! I also experienced deep joy. One feels like this when one gives initiation to a true devotee. In such a case initiation becomes fruitful.”

It would be interesting to note here a few of the large number of letters the Swami received every day, and his reactions and answers. We shall present only a representative cross section which we hope will complete the picture we have tried to paint in this chapter on his daily life.

A monk of the Order who lived in the Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati in the Himalayas was going on a pilgrimage to Kailas in Tibet. In order to go to Kailas one has to travel across the rather inaccessible Himalayas, where there are very few roads before reaching Tibet, the highest table-land in the

world. The journey is, therefore, quite arduous and difficult. Apprehensive, the monk wrote to the Swami for his approval and blessing. In reply the Swami encouraged him and said: "I sincerely pray that through the grace of the Lord you return safely after visiting Kailas. He is always watching you. 'Whoever goes on his way repeating 'Durga, Durga', Shiva¹⁵ with His trident protects him.' The Master used to quote this all the time. Go on and finish your trip, thinking of Him. He is your God and Protector. Accept my hearty blessings and convey the same to A, J and others there. Through His grace, all goes well at the math. I pray for your all-round welfare."¹⁶

An initiated devotee wrote, narrating the story of his sinful life previous to his initiation. Extremely repentant for his past misdeeds, he begged the Swami to forgive him and lift him from the quagmire of despondency. The Swami sat quiet, looking serious for a while after hearing the story, and then said: "The man has genuine repentance in his heart. 'Blessed are those who repent, for they shall see God'." Addressing the attendant who read the letter, he then said: "Write to the man like this: 'Don't be afraid. The Lord will certainly redeem you. To Him no sin is too great. He was born to redeem people like you. He is the Indwelling Spirit, residing in every heart. He has been gracious to you, knowing full well your past, present and future. Be

¹⁵ Shiva and Durga represent the impersonal and personal aspects of God. They are, as it were, the Father and Mother of the universe. Durga is the supreme creative principle—the giver of plenty.

¹⁶ An unpublished letter.

wholly resigned to Him. From now on He is holding you by the hand. He will not let you slip any more. Have no worry, my child. Call upon Him earnestly. He will assuredly come to your rescue and bring you deliverance. Your confession to me has destroyed all your sins. Henceforth you are sinless. You are a devotee of the Lord, living under His protecting wings. Pray to Him for purity, devotion and love'.¹⁷

A woman devotee, overwhelmed with grief by the death of her husband, wrote, praying for consolation and peace. The Swami seemed very much moved as the letter was read out to him. Full of sympathy, he pictured himself in the position of the grief-stricken woman and exclaimed, "Ah, I cannot stand it any more!" For a while the Swami sat pensive, closing his eyes, and then remarked: "The Mother of the universe is having Her sport and man suffers!¹⁸ Who will understand all this? Man can escape all this pain if he pauses and thinks of the unreality of the world; and yet, day and night, he is engrossed in maya. It is good to think of death at times. In how many ways is the evanescence of everything driven home to man, and yet he does not wake up! This is what is called maya.

"Man is like a silkworm. He builds for himself this world of maya, and suffers all kinds of misery, being imprisoned there. He does not, in

¹⁷ *Shivananda Vani*, II

¹⁸ Man suffers because of his karma. Karma, good and bad, produces corresponding results. It is ignorance that is the root of all evil. Ignorance begets desires which lead to activity bringing either pleasure or pain. Although God upholds the law of karma, He is not directly responsible for man's pleasure and pain.

the least, realize that all those whom he considers his own are not really his. Embodiment, by itself, is so painful! On top of this is attachment. What can man do? Bewildered by the veiling power of maya, man is caught in the net, as it were, and suffers. It is impossible to fathom the scheme of the Mother. She has Her destructive sport too. That is why the Master used to say: 'Who will understand Thy sport? I do not care to understand Thee. My only prayer is: Give me pure love at Thy lotus feet.'"¹⁹

Another person wrote about the death of a beloved disciple of Swami Brahmananda. The news brought tears to Mahapurushji's eyes and he said: "Ah! H (the deceased devotee) had great love and devotion for Maharaj. He was an excellent man and a good devotee. Maharaj was very gracious to him. That is why he liberated his soul and took him along with him to the blessed abode by appearing to him. The grace of Maharaj is as valid as the grace of the Master." H had a remarkable death.²⁰ Shortly before passing on he had a vision of Sri Maharaj who stood in front of him, holding in his hand a flower which he wished to give to him. The devotee was beside himself with joy as he saw Maharaj and tried to get up from his bed to salute his guru. As he was physically very weak, he failed in his attempt and asked someone standing near to get the flower for him. Nobody else could see Swami Brahmananda. At this H remarked: 'Strange! Don't you see? Maharaj is standing right here with the flower in

¹⁹⁻²⁰ *Shivananda Vani*, II

his hand.' The man uttered many beautiful things until finally in an exalted mood he breathed his last.

Following are samples of five more letters ²¹ written by the Swami in reply to certain questions and problems of devotees:

I

"It has been long since I heard from you last. I hope that through the grace of the Lord you are well, physically and spiritually. I pray that your faith, love and devotion grow from day to day. May you find peace in your heart! The more you think about God, the more you will feel His presence with increasing peace. The Lord is very gracious to His devotees and listens to their earnest prayers.

"It is true that one feels bad if one has to deal with worldly people all the time. One thing I would specially advise you: Whenever you talk with a person, never indulge in criticisms of others nor listen to them. If you hear any criticism, keep quiet without taking part in it. Mind this particularly. Gossip, active or passive, tarnishes the mind and lowers it very much. It is a handicap to devotion for God.

"My daughter, the mind can be absolutely free from fear if it thinks about God. Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) gave up his body. All of us will also die; anyone who is embodied will do the same, there is no doubt about it. The devotees of the Master who passed away — all of them are living in their spiritual bodies in his divine realm. It is a fact. If you call upon the Master and meditate upon him, he will indeed be pleased. It will also please his devotees who are with him. Know this for certain. What more shall I say?

²¹ *Sri Sri Mahapurushjir Patra* (Letters of Mahapurushji)

Accept my hearty love and blessing. Write me when it is convenient. Through His grace my body is fairly well."

II

"I learnt everything from your letter. Don't be disturbed. Continue the repetition of His name and meditation upon Him as you have been doing. It is not possible to control the mind that has been used to thinking of the objects of the senses and enjoying them all these years and lay it at the feet of the Lord right away. Gradually, by the repetition of His name and earnest prayers to Him the mind will become absorbed in Him. Know for certain that the impossible becomes possible through His grace. Our Master is an incarnation of God — the Lord and teacher of this age. He is the Indwelling Spirit. If one calls upon him and thinks about him, one's heart becomes illumined. In your case too it will happen; it will surely happen, I assure you. The Master refuses no one. Whoever calls upon him and wants him, finds him. You too will do the same. Never allow despair to enter your mind. When by good luck you have come to us, you are bound to have your heart's desires fulfilled. Don't worry. The mind is by nature restless. You will have to steady it by the power of the name of the Lord and by prayer. The mind has within it all kinds of bad old impressions stored there. You will have to attenuate and weaken those impressions through the repetition of His name and prayer. Have no fear. As far as possible keep holy company, avoiding the association of worldly people.

"Accept my hearty love and blessing. Write to me every now and then. Through His grace all goes well here.

III

“ I duly received your letter. I feel I don't have much to write in reply, because you yourself have grasped and answered your question. Every man should do something good, that is, some selfless deed. All by nature work to support themselves and their families. By something good I mean activity done without any attachment. If you can help a poor man by giving him food, or educate a needy boy by providing his board and lodging according to your means, that will be sufficient. In cases that are beyond your means you can engage in such good deeds in co-operation with friends of yours. Many activities of this nature you will find close at hand. If you wish to do them, you can easily do so. Then your life will not seem to be so unbearable as it does now. Along with that you should, of course, keep up your spiritual practices and meditations upon God. Then you will find peace.

“ The teachings of Swami Vivekananda are very great; they are indeed conducive to the well-being of souls. They are badly needed in these days. We (the Indians) have become very inert. Our so called spiritual tendencies are the outcome of this decadent condition; it is inertia posing as goodness. That is why we feel that we should retire to a forest in order to call upon God in preference to performing our duties in the world. How difficult this life is (that of exclusive meditation away from the world) is known to those who have taken to it. If that were the right pattern to be followed by all at this time, Sri Ramakrishna, who is the ideal of this age, would have taught his disciples accordingly; he himself would have set the example. Swami Vivekananda and the other great disciples of the Master would also have acted and taught people

the same way. What more shall I write? Continue the work you are doing in the world while engaging in some form of selfless activity. Accept my sincere blessing. May the Lord bless you!"

IV

"I received your letter with all the news. I had also received your previous letter. What you wrote was not only extremely inadvisable but sounded like the raving of a man in delirium. You stated that you didn't care to look after your aged mother and wanted to be a monk, and so on. That is why I did not feel like replying. According to my understanding, an able-bodied son, and an only son — who thinks of renouncing the world in preference to caring for his aged dependent mother, does not deserve to be a devotee of the Lord. I know quite well that where you are you can easily give your heart and soul to God, growing in devotion; and the Lord will surely be gracious to you. So patiently remain contented with the position the Lord has put you in. A genuine devotee is like a kitten. In whatever position God places him, he is satisfied and calls upon Him, faithfully carrying on his spiritual practices and devotions. You will certainly have peace in your mind if you can be resigned like this; otherwise you will be spending your days in unhappiness, even if you become a monk. If it be His will to make a monk of you, He will see to it that you become one. You will not accomplish anything by unnecessary worry and hurry. Care for your old mother with joy and continue the work you are doing while directing your mind wholly to God. That is how you will find peace.

"We are still here. Most probably after the Shivaratri festival we shall return to the math.

In case you come, we shall meet you there. Accept my hearty blessings."

V

"I am glad to receive your letter. It has been two weeks since we arrived at the math. My body is fairly well. I am very happy to know that you have gone home, after giving up your position and that you are mentally peaceful. Now you will be able to carry out nicely the service of the Lord as well as your spiritual practice. You will also keep better health. You have done well to begin the work of weaving, it will do a lot of good to the ashrama and to the people of the neighbourhood. May the Mother be gracious to you! I am very pleased to hear that you have sent for seeds and laid out the yard of the ashrama in flower beds. Decorate the Lord and the Mother with flowers when you do the worship.

"Plain living and high thinking has always been the ideal of India. Eat plain food, wear simple clothes, live a pure spiritual life, and teach your fellowmen to do the same. That will do you and the country good. Through the grace of the Lord, preaching by word of mouth is unnecessary when the character is formed; example is better than precept.

"It is an excellent idea to establish yourself well at the ashrama. Later, if you think it necessary, you may visit the math or go to Benares. That will be all right.

"M is undoubtedly a very good soul. By working with him you really got the opportunity to engage in many good deeds through His grace. Write him a letter to this effect. Occasionally also write to his son letters indicative of your interest in him. You can, of course, accept

any monthly allowance that the boy may be willing to send you; otherwise, they might think that you are displeased with them. You are certainly very much indebted to them. The boy is very good. May the Lord bless him!

“ I am glad to hear that you are giving medicines to needy people at the ashrama. The Lord will grant you all the strength you need. Think of the Lord and prescribe medicine, consulting medical books; you are bound to succeed. When the sickness of a patient is of a complicated nature and you fail to diagnose the case, you should ask him to consult some other doctor. ”

The Swami always took keen interest in the activities of the Order abroad. Every day he looked forward to receiving news from America and from Europe, where there are several preaching centres. His joy knew no bounds if he chanced to hear about the expansion of the movement. Sometimes the monks working in foreign countries had to do the job of pioneers, plodding on against heavy odds, fighting prejudice and discrimination. The Swami used to write to them, cheering and praying for them.

P in California needed an assistant and sent passage money to the headquarters with a request for one. Mahapurushji, in consultation with the senior monks of the Order, selected V, whom he wished to send.

To V he wrote from Ootacamund in Southern India, where he happened to be at the time: “ I duly received your letter. Everyone here, including myself, is fairly well. My body is getting old, so I have minor ailments, such as colds, rheumatism,

and so on. It is not so painful, however. Every day, morning and evening, I go out for a walk, covering from three to four miles. Of course, I have to walk along level roads; I can't do much climbing. I am glad to know that you are all doing well, studying and practising elocution, and lecturing under the guidance of S.

“It is my wish that you go to America to assist P. Through the Lord's grace P's work is growing, and he needs an assistant. D is already there. It would be a good thing for you to go; S must have told you about it. As soon as you come down to the math, Sarat Maharaj (Swami Saradananda) will fix a date for your sailing; the buying of clothes as well as other preliminaries will also be attended to. I hope that through His grace you will not be unwilling to go. Repeating His name and holding the image of Sri Maharaj, your guru, in your heart, go and do the work of the Master and Swamiji. It is my belief that through His grace you will do splendid work there. Accept my hearty love and blessing and convey the same to all.”

A monk who had been in America for some-time wrote to the Swami reporting his work. In reply, the Swami, who was then in Ootacamund, wrote the following beautiful letter: ²³

“I am very glad to receive yours of 1st June with all the news about everybody there. It makes me very happy to know that your work is progressing nicely. Others also in their letters have mentioned your success and reputation. You had your training under the tutelage of Sri Maharaj. You belong to the fold of our Lord and

²³ Unpublished letters

are our very own, not a counterfeit nor a fake. If you don't bring glory to our eternal Vedic religion and culture, who else will? You are treading the path marked out by our Swamiji. Every step of yours is being guided by the power of the Lord. Why should you take a false step or do anything wrong? Having Him as your ideal, go straight ahead along your course; you will never have any difficulty. If you disregard the path by deviating from the ideal, you will, of course, come to grief, with lots of troubles. Always remember this. I know for certain that you will never be sidetracked. I firmly believe that you will be the means of bringing glory to the Master, to Swamiji and to all of us. You will bring good name to our country, and to her culture and civilization.

“You are abroad to deliver His blessed message — to bring to people His great teachings, and not for self-glorification nor for publicity. By living an ideal life you are trying to open the eyes of people, showing them the beauty of spiritual knowledge — of people, who are extrovert and materialistically inclined. You are bound to succeed. If His advent has any meaning and His words any worth and truth in them, possessing the power to bring peace — then whoever hears them will be uplifted with a better understanding of the ideal, no matter who preaches them. The power that is doing the work belongs to God; we are simply instruments for its expression. It will expand itself; be blessed by becoming its willing instrument. Spread His ideas as much as you can. By discussing these ideas with people you will be blessed by having peace within. You are all holding on to the Lord. You have no reason to be afraid. . . .

“Know this for certain, that wherever there is Truth, there is God, and victory. Your work is:

based upon Truth. Nobody can do any harm to you, even if hundreds stand against you. In time, even those who try to antagonize you will change and assist in your work. People may be cheated a few times by fakes but will eventually gravitate towards a movement that stands upon Truth; and those very people will be your staunchest admirers. It is quite lucky that you have been able to rent a place for a very small sum. Let the work grow slowly; success that comes all at once does not amount to anything. I bless you that the Lord may use you for His genuine work.

‘I trust that by now P along with D and A have arrived in America and you must have met them. What does P say about us at the math? How are D and A faring, and what is their impression? Convey to all my hearty love and blessing. They are all excellent monks. In the beginning they may feel a little strange and handicapped there, but gradually by His grace everything will be easy. My love and best wishes are always with them. Now that you are growing in number, try to visit each other often; it will make you all happy. Of course, R lives far away on the East coast. I was glad to hear from B and am replying to his letter by this mail.

“I left the math on the 2nd of May, and after visiting Bhuvaneswar and Madras, finally arrived here on the 3rd of June. You had been here. I like the place very much. Physically I am quite well. This year we are not having much rain. Even if it rained, I should like the place. A monastery is being constructed on a two-acre plot of land given by a man at Bishop’s Down. Perhaps you remember the name of this place. We shall have a small beginning; gradually it will expand; the building is nearly complete. Most probably on the 1st or the 10th, or perhaps

on the 12th of August, we shall have the dedication ceremony. Then I may go to Bombay via Nattarampalli, Bangalore and Mysore. After staying for some time in Bombay, I will return to the math by the end of October or the middle of November.”

A monk of the Order, who had been sent to the United States for preaching, wrote to Mahapurush for directions. He especially wanted to know how he should instruct the many who came to him for help. In reply the Swami wrote the following interesting letter: ²⁴

“Through your recent communication I received news about your work. Later from D who arrived at the math on the 4th of January, I came to know more about you, and it pleased me very much. D spoke highly of you and of A. He is of the opinion that you two will manage the work splendidly and be the means for the propagation of Vedanta to many. At the time he left America, you were not quite well. I hope that by now you have fully recovered.

“As the teachings of Vedanta spread farther, more people who are genuinely spiritual are bound to come to you. You should, of course, try to help them, individually as best as you can. Can a man make real spiritual progress unless he has proper direction along his own line? Can the desire to call upon God and realize Him be satisfied by simply attending services at a church? Can one truly love God unless one has been able to establish a special relationship with Him? You should, therefore, direct people in their individual paths and tell them their Chosen Ideals; that will be the speciality of your instruction. The number of people who are fit to follow the

²⁴ Unpublished letters

formless and impersonal aspect of the Deity will, naturally, be limited. You should help such, too, if you come across them. There is no knowing in how many ways He reaches people. If you find people who can accept Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation of God, well and good. You should also help those who think of the Master as a teacher of man, trying to mould their lives according to his life and teachings. You may also find some who would be unwilling to go that far; you should accept them too. Because, in course of time, by knowing you and loving you, even such people will develop faith and devotion for the Lord. Tell each seeker who comes to you for instruction to think of the Master, to salute him any pray to him, before starting the practice of meditation. The Master is the Lord of this age. To realize God will be easier for the man who can accept him and his ideas. Another thing; although individuals may have different Chosen Ideals and be following different paths, they are all worshipping the one Principle who is the Soul of everything. The different Chosen Ideals are nothing but various expressions and manifestations of the one God in accordance with the temperamental needs of individual seekers. Sri Ramakrishna is the symbol of all; do not forget to impress this idea. It will foster mutual sympathy and toleration, which was one of the main purposes of the Master's advent. There will be those who like to think of Christ as their ideal; instruct them accordingly.

“You stated in your letter that the Lord is the guru and you are simply an instrument; that is absolutely true. We have all taken refuge in Him. He will set everything right. Through His grace you will never falter or take a false step. He is there to protect you. Don't be afraid; you are there to carry on His work. He has given

you the power and will give more. The more you grow in discrimination and dispassion, the more power you will manifest. Even if you yourself are not aware of it, others will feel it. Always remember that He is the All-in-all; you are nothing. The more this idea grows in you, the more you will be the channel for a greater expression of His power. I sincerely pray that you lose yourself in Him.

“Since the Durga Puja festival my health has been quite bad. Symptoms of high blood pressure, asthmatic spells, insomnia, and so on, are always there. Subodhananda has developed tuberculosis, in addition to his diabetic condition, so his case is quite serious. Both of his lungs are affected. Allopaths have given up all hope of his recovery. From today he will be under the treatment of a native monk physician who came to see him. His will be done! Otherwise all goes well at the math. Both you and A are to accept my hearty love and blessing. May you both prosper spiritually is my sincere prayer to Him!”

An American lady who has been connected with the Vedanta movement for a long time used to correspond with the Swami. He was very kind to her and often wrote to her. At one time this devotee, very eager to know about the Swami's own life, requested him to write something. In reply, the Swami was kind enough to narrate certain incidents of his life: how he met Sri Ramakrishna; how he felt, and so on. We reproduce here the substance of that letter: ²⁵

“I am very glad to receive your letter of January, 5, 1932. I also received on time the

²⁵ Unpublished letters

photographs you had sent me. They were all very beautiful, and we liked them very much. Through the grace of the Lord, your work is going on all right, and A is lecturing in Washington, D. C. May the Lord bless him!

“Yes, I am writing a short note regarding my personal life, as I promised previously. I am keeping indifferent health, so I may not tell you everything as I wish to. From my early boyhood I had a deep longing to know God and to realize Him. That longing grew with age. Urged by it, I would go to the Brahma Samaj and visit holy men, who I thought would be able to help me. I also practised what they advised me. Family life had no charm for me, even from my boyhood. On my father’s death I had to give up my studies early on account of the straitened circumstances of the family. Myself being the only male child, with two dependent sisters, I had to come to Calcutta to seek a job. This made my heart very heavy. I would often weep and pray to God, asking Him to free me from all these ties. In Calcutta I first met Sri Ramakrishna at the house of Ram Chandra Datta. Next I met him at Dakshineswar.

“In the dim light of an oil lamp I saw the Master seated cross-legged in his room with three or four others seated on the floor in front of him. The short audience was enough for me: at once I felt a deep attachment for the Master. I felt as if I had known him for a long time. My heart became filled with joy. I saw in him my tender, loving mother waiting for me. So with the confidence, faith and certitude of a child, I surrendered myself to him, placing myself entirely under his care. I became certain that at last I found him for whom I had been searching all these days. Since then I looked upon the Master as my mother. He also treated me the

same way. After this momentous visit my life at home and work at the office seemed to be like a heavy load. I would often run to him, visiting him at Dakshineswar or in Calcutta.

“During my second or third visit, as I was serving him, the Master, in an ecstatic mood, touched my chest. The magic touch took away my outward consciousness, plunging me into a deep meditative state. I do not know how long I remained in that state. As a result of the touch everything became revealed to me; I realized that I was the Soul, eternal and free; I realized that the Master was the Lord born as man, for the good of mankind, and that I was on earth to serve him. He bestowed upon me the blessing of a similar experience again under the Banyan tree at Panchavati.

“Notwithstanding this, he would not allow us to rest on our laurels, but would constantly urge us, with infinite patience, to taste the fruits of his realization by our own efforts. He watched our efforts and directed us to proceed on our own lines. Bigotry and fanaticism had no place in his life and teaching. He would accept all of all denominations with equal love and sympathy. To come in contact with him was to become spiritual forever. To live with him was to live in the presence of God.

“I had to marry against my wish, and that was a great trial for me. My determination to renounce the world deepened as I prayed night after night with tears in my eyes, asking God not to bind me down with chains of the world. On the death of my wife I was relieved of all bondages and I ran straight to Dakshineswar. I begged the Master to allow me to stay with him. He kindly accepted me. Since then for the next three years he was with us in the body, I lived

almost constantly with him. At Dakshineswar I met Swamiji as well as the Swamis Brahmananda and Premananda. Amongst us Swamiji was loved and trusted most by the Master.

“After the Master’s passing away I travelled all over India and endeavoured much to know God in His different aspects. I liked the Himalayas very much and also spent some time in South India and Ceylon. Benares, the city of Shiva, I loved much. All my efforts have ended in realizing Him everywhere. Sri Ramakrishna is the centre from which all the radii have travelled towards the circumference. I have not realized, but I have seen God — not in an astral form, but in the tangible, human form. I declare to you that Sri Ramakrishna is the fullest manifestation of Him for the present, the highest manifestation of Him in human form. Follow him in your own way. You will surely attain through his grace the ultimate peace and blessedness. You are fortunate that you have come within his orbit. My blessings and best wishes to you, B and F. Let me know if this letter satisfies you.”

Physically ill or well, the Swami was always in excellent spirits, shedding sunshine and joy on all, either by his presence or by his talks, or perhaps by his words conveyed through the mail. In his efforts to serve God in man, Mahapurush never spared himself.

CHAPTER XI

IN VARYING SPIRITUAL MOODS

From time immemorial spirituality has been the keynote of Indian civilization. India was great and is still so because of her loyalty to God and religion; never has she relinquished eternal values in favour of those that are temporal, perishable. It is her saints and sages who have kept this fire of spirituality alive. In modern times, it has been Sri Ramakrishna and his great disciples, including Swami Shivananda, who have helped substantially in this direction. Swami Shivananda was indeed a roaring fire of spirituality: the warmth of his life inspired innumerable monks and devotees.

We have noted that in his younger days the Swami was partial to the formless, impersonal aspect of the Deity, but that in the course of time he learned to appreciate God in His other aspects also, thinking of Him and worshipping Him more comprehensively. Every now and then, however, in his words or actions, he would still manifest deep love of the impersonal; the monist in him, despite himself, would be thrown into bold relief. In his old age, because of protracted illness, he had to be constantly under medical care, and whenever his condition became worse the doctor was sent for. Perhaps his attendant would say, "Let the doctor come and see you." Half in joke and half seriously, the Swami would reply, "What will the doctor do?"

How can the doctor see me? I am formless." Again he would say, "I am the eternal Supreme Being — ever pure, illumined and free. The Master has given me this knowledge in the fullest measure. That is why it does not make any difference whether the body is well, sick or old. The Master has made clear to me the way to the abode of Immortality. Time, place and person belong to the world of phenomena. When the mind becomes absorbed in meditation, one has no consciousness of these categories." ¹

The Swami's leaning toward the impersonal was, of course, in his later years modified and mel-
lowed by supreme devotion. Actually, he perceiv-
ed knowledge and devotion to be only different
readings of the one Ultimate Reality and in the last
analysis identical. Thus, though he often spoke
monistically, he always took pains to make it clear
that devotion as well as knowledge are necessary to
the spiritual aspirant.

One day a monk of the Order came in and
saluted the Swami. Having inquired about the
monk's physical and spiritual welfare, Mahapurush
asked, "If knowledge lacks devotion, what kind of
knowledge is it?" The monk replied, "Maharaj,
such knowledge is not worth the name." The
Swami said: "That's right, my child. Know-
ledge without devotion is not enough; realization
is impossible without devotion." It is good to
discriminate between the real and the unreal; no
doubt it is also helpful. But devotion is what
counts. True devotion has knowledge too. Is it

¹ *Shivananda Vani*, I

an easy thing to have devotion? If one has genuine devotion, one has everything. Devotion is a wonderful thing: it softens and mellows the mind. Sri Chaitanya, Swamiji and others were full of devotion. The Upanishads have plenty of devotion in them. Sri Chaitanya explained what true devotion was, when he said: "O Lord of the Universe, mine is no prayer for wealth or retinue or a beautiful wife. I do not care even for omniscience. As many times as I may be born, grant me, O Lord, pure and selfless love for Thee!"² In Mahapurush there was indeed a harmonious blending of knowledge and devotion, and they were of the highest kind.

All through the years Swami Shivananda showed a remarkable fondness for the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. These holy texts contain the essence of Hindu philosophy and religion, marking the highest flight of human thought. The Swami had copies of the Upanishads, the Gita and the Chandi on his table and read them occasionally. Filled with the spirit of the ancient seers, he often spoke eloquently to the monks and devotees gathered about him, telling them of the glories of the Self, the unchanging, birthless and deathless Self, or of God. He was very partial to some of the Vedic hymns, especially the Nasadiya Sukta of the Rig-Veda, which describes the Absolute both in Its undifferentiated state and in Its state of becoming the relative — the world of phenomena. In his inimitable way he would chant from this hymn:

² *Shivananda Vani*, II

“Nor Aught nor Nought existed: yon bright sky
Was not, nor heaven’s broad woof outstretched
above.

What covered all? What concealed?
Was it the water’s fathomless abyss?”³

After chanting these lines he once said to his attendant, “Ah, how profound it is! There, on that table, you will find a copy of it, which I often read. It describes a state of deep meditation. Would you please read all of it?” The attendant read the hymn, the Swami joining in the reading:

“There was not death — yet was there naught
immortal:

There was no confine betwixt day and night.
The only One breathed breathless by Itself,
Other than It there nothing since has been.
Darkness there was, and all at first was veiled
In gloom profound — an ocean without light —
The germ that still lay covered in the husk

Burst forth, one nature, from the fervent heat.
Then first came love upon it, the new spring

Of mind — yes, poets in their hearts discerned,
Pondering, this bond between created things
And uncreated. Comes this spark from earth
Piercing and all-pervading, or from heaven?

Then seeds were sown, and mighty powers arose—
Nature below, and power and will above —
Who knows the secret? Who proclaimed it here?

Whence, whence this manifold creation sprang?
He from whom all this great creation came,
Whether His will created or was mute,

The most High Seer that is in highest heaven,
He knows it — or perchance even He knows
not!”⁴

^{3,4} Translated by Max Muller

Everyone present felt uplifted by hearing the hymn; they appreciated its great poetic beauty and the sublimity of the conception expressed in it. A Bengali translation of the hymn was then read, after which the Swami said, "You see herein a description of some of the loftiest states of realization reached by yogis in deep meditation. A level of consciousness beyond the reach of ordinary speech and mind is mentioned here. Swamiji was very fond of the Nasadiya Sukta. He would chant it so rhythmically, in the strict Vedic metre, that one would feel as if a Vedic seer were repeating his own spiritual experience.

Darkness there was, and all at first was veiled
In gloom profound — an ocean without light —

Swamiji would chant this portion of the hymn and say that nowhere else, in any language, would one find such poetic beauty. In one of his writings he brought out this idea nicely." ⁵

In India, each day of the week has a distinctive spiritual meaning and character because of certain associations and traditions, and each day observed in a particular way evokes in an illumined soul various spiritual emotions and experiences. Swami Shivananda's life was highly illustrative of this fact. For instance, on Monday, the day sacred to Shiva, the Great God, the ideal of meditation and renunciation, the Swami would be thinking of Shiva, whose name he bore and of whom he seemed especially fond. He would ecstatically chant hymns about

⁵ *Shivananda Vani*, I

Shiva, sing His glories, and talk of Him. He would say, "I find the whole world is filled with Shiva. Salutations to Shiva. Satchidananda. All is full of Shiva." Pushpadanta's hymn on Shiva's greatness was one of his favourites. He had it read out to him every Monday morning. Also, he admired the songs on Shiva by Girish Chandra Ghosh, and the beautiful ones by Swami Vivekananda. Many times and with much feeling he sang Swamiji's song of Shiva dancing His cosmic dance:

"Lo, the Great God dances —
Shiva the all-destroyer and Lord of creation,
The Master of yoga and the wielder of pinaka.
His flaming matted locks unfurl and fill the sky.
The seven worlds keep time and play the rhythm
As the trembling earth sways to dissolution.
Lo, the Great God Shiva dances."

The Shiva-ratri festival, celebrated on the night of Shiva, in early spring, is sacred to monks and devotees alike. Devoted to fasting, vigil, prayer and meditation, it is one of the most uplifting of religious events. A certain monk of the Order proudly recalls the many Shiva-ratri festivals he attended at Belur, and particularly those rare ones in which some of the direct disciples of the Master participated. Customarily, there are four worships of Shiva, one during each of the four quarters of the night, and the intervals are occupied with chanting, singing or dancing. In one such festival Swami Shivananda, along with the great Swamis Brahmananda, Premananda, Turiyananda and others, was present. After the first worship the Swamis, filled

with the spirit of the Great God, began dancing and singing; the whole monastery grounds reverberated with the sound of it and became surcharged with spirituality. It was an unforgettable event.

On Tuesdays and Saturdays, or perhaps on nights preceding the new moon, the Swami would be thinking of the Mother of the Universe, the Supreme Creative Energy in Her beneficent as well as Her terrible aspect. He was as simple and guileless as a child of five, relying on the Mother for everything. It was during the latter part of his life that he liked especially to worship God as the Mother Principle, and with what devotion and resignation he would speak of Her! On days associated with Her worship he sometimes asked his attendant to recite the sacred verses of the Chandi describing the Mother and Her exploits, or perhaps he himself would burst forth into songs about the Mother composed by Ramprasad and Kamalakanta. The following song⁶, which the Master also had enjoyed, was one of his favourites:

“ In the world’s busy market pace,
 O Mother, Thou art flying kites;
 High up they soar on wind of hope,
 Held fast by maya’s string.
 Out of a hundred thousand kites,
 At best but one or two break free;
 And Thou dost laugh and clap Thy hands,

O Mother, watching them! ”

In connection with this song the Swami would speak of the world-bewitching power of maya, the principle of nescience, and explain how it keeps men

⁶ By Ramprasad

and women fettered here, away from the Mother of the Universe. "One out of thousands strives after spiritual emancipation, and out of those who strive, only one or two know Me in reality."⁷ It is very difficult, nay, impossible, to realize the Mother unless one has Her grace. Through Her grace the light may flash in the twinkling of an eye, bringing illumination and freedom to a mind long bound in ignorance.

The autumnal worship of the Divine Mother Durga, the giver of peace, plenty and protection, is by far the most popular Indian religious festival; it is observed over the entire land. Schools, colleges and offices close for a long period and there is universal feasting, rejoicing and spiritual fervour.

At the Belur Math this festival is, of course, given much importance. Several days before the actual worship which lasts three days, Swami Shivananda used to be in an expectant mood, humming songs describing the Mother's coming. Life-size images of the Mother and Her household were placed on an altar under an improvised canopy in the paved rear courtyard of the monastery, and the worship would be performed with great devotion by the monks of the Order. The presence of Mahapurush always added to the solemnity and joy of the occasion.

We shall describe here one such Durga Puja festival, which was observed at the math in 1932. The following quotation graphically portrays the Swami's mood: "Since the day the sculptor had started fashioning the image, Mahapurushji had

⁷ *Bhagavad Gita*, VII, 3

been beside himself with spiritual fervour, thinking about the Mother. Like a child he repeated over and over, Mother! Mother! Sometimes out of sheer joy he sang songs picturing the Mother's coming: at other times he taught some of the sadhus of the monastery to sing one or two new songs descriptive of Her visit. The joy in his heart was flowing like a fountain with a thousand streams." ⁸

In the morning previous to the first day of worship, a monk came to the Swami's room and sang with much feeling a song about the Mother. This the Swami enjoyed immensely. He had an upsurge of spiritual emotion, and in appreciation exclaimed, "Ah! Ah!" Then controlling himself he said to the singer: "Go! Go! Leave me alone! You have caused me to break the pot right in the marketplace (meaning that he was embarrassed because he could not restrain his spiritual emotions before others). My condition is just like that of a dry matchstick. The Master used to say, 'The slightest stroke is enough to ignite a dry match;' and so it is with me." ⁹

When the worship was about to commence in the morning, many monks and devotees came upstairs to visit the Swami. He affectionately greeted them, saying, "The Mother is here. May you have great joy! Now we should have nothing but joy." At frequent intervals, seated in his room, he made inquiries as to the progress of the worship. At the time when the ritual of invoking life into the image was being performed, he became impatient and expressed great eagerness to go to the hall of

⁸⁻⁹ *Shivananda Vani, I*

worship. As he was not well, not strong enough physically to walk down the stairs, he was carried to the place on a lounging chair. Like a simple child he stood before the altar with folded hands, looking intently on the Mother. He was in a sublime devotional mood, his face radiant with a divine glow. Caught in the spell, all who were present fell into an attitude of prayer and communion with God. The invocation ceremony over, the Swami bowed reverently to the Mother, and then asked to be taken back to his room.

As was customary, in the evening after vespers a large number of monks and devotees came upstairs to offer salutations to the Swami. Addressing them, he expressed many beautiful ideas, the substance of which was:

“The worship of the Mother at the Monastery is without parallel. Here it is a worship of pure devotion; we do not have any other motive than to please the Mother. So many pure monks and novices have gathered here, and they are so whole-hearted in their worship! They have renounced hearth and home, seeking spiritual enlightenment! The Mother is sure to respond to their fervent invocations and prayers. Here She is more manifest than anywhere else. People may spend thousands of rupees in worship, but such faith and devotion are rare. The scriptures say that when the image is beautiful, the worshipper devout, and he who assists in the worship pure and selfless — such worship evokes a special manifestation of the Deity. Here all the conditions are fulfilled.

“Our Master was born for the establishment of religion. Before his advent, worship and devotions had been neglected and had almost died out. The Master infused a new spirit into everything.

Swamiji introduced the worship of Mother Durga at the Baranagore monastery. Again it was Swamiji who for the first time worshipped Mother Durga in the image at Belur. The Holy Mother came to Belur for the occasion, and she remarked that Mother Durga would come here every year." ¹⁰

In reply to a question the Swami then discussed the three kinds and types of worship: sattvika, rajasika, and tamasika, and he spoke of their use and place in spiritual life. In conclusion he said: "The most important thing in life is to attain pure devotion at the lotus feet of the Mother; that is also the purpose of worship. Once one is able to install the Mother in the temple of the heart, one does not need external pomp and ritual. Now that the Mother is here, let us rejoice! We know that the Mother is ever present in our hearts." ¹¹

Another year, when the time for the Durga Puja festival had arrived, the Swami's sickness took a serious turn, and everybody thought it prudent to conduct the celebration very quietly and cut short the festivities, in order to give the Swami as much rest as possible. Moreover, the customary devotional singing on the third and most important night was omitted. The Swami noticed this, and at a late hour sent for several monks, to whom he said, "Tonight is the great third night of the worship, a time for intense joy. How is it that you are keeping silent? What about the songs?" ¹² When a monk explained the reason for the silence, the Swami answered, "What of that? I feel fine

¹⁰⁻¹² *Shivananda Vani*, I

when I hear devotional music. Just because this body is ill, does it mean you should not entertain my Blissful Mother, that you should not rejoice? Go and sing devotional songs.”¹³

The birthday anniversary celebrations of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Holy Mother, Swami Brahmananda and other disciples of the Master were always great events in the annals of the Order, bringing a large number of monks and devotees to the math. Mahapurush generally guided the monks who managed these celebrations. Most of the time, if physically fit, he presided over the meetings that were held in connection with them. His observations and advice contributed largely to the success of all such festivities: his inspiring presence added to the spiritual fervour and rejoicing of everyone who participated in them.

On those occasions, as also at other times, if the Swami were in the mood, he might hint at some of his own spiritual experiences, or he might tell many precious reminiscences of the Master and of the brother disciples, and of the memorable days at Dakshineswar, Cossipore and Baranagore.

Regarding his personal attitude towards Sri Ramakrishna, we have already seen that to him the Master was God incarnate, born for the good of both India and the world at large. Many times he said that the Master was ever shining in his heart; that he always felt his living presence: and that, with every breath he drew, he perceived the Master and was guided by him. Once he declared, “Just as

¹³ *Shivananda Vani*, I

children tell their mother about any discomfort or suffering, so also I tell him (the Master). I used to look upon him as Mother and to call him Mother, and I do so still. But now Mother has become infinite. I find She is the All — the whole universe is within Her.”¹⁴

Again, the Swami said, “God himself came down as man; it happened only the other day. The whole drama was enacted before our very eyes. What a fire of spirituality did he ignite! Even now people feel the warmth of that fire. This age is indeed holy.”¹⁵ Naturally, the Swami considered Dakshineswar very sacred. He used to say, “I feel it is Benares itself. That is why I visit it from time to time. As I cannot go there often, I salute it from here every day.”¹⁶

One morning a large number of newly ordained monks and novices decided to go to Dakshineswar with the idea of spending the entire day in prayer, worship and meditation. They assembled at the Swami's room before leaving. Very much pleased, the Swami encouraged them and blessed them, saying: “Dakshineswar is like heaven on earth to us: it is our Kailas and Vaikuntha. It is not to be made light of. The Panchavati, the grove of five trees, is the siddha pitha, the sacred spot, where the Master had so much spiritual experience and ecstasy! The Master had some dust of Vrindavan brought here and scattered. In Dakshineswar for twelve long years he practised many forms of spiritual discipline. There he had so many unique

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ *Shivananda Vani*, I

experiences and realizations. Every speck of the dust of this place is holy. Dakshineswar has become most sacred — a place of pilgrimage by touching the feet of God.”¹⁷ As the Swami spoke of Dakshineswar his face turned radiant with divine fervour. Soon he became indrawn, abstracted and silent.

Devotional music always formed an important item in the daily routine of the Belur monks. Every evening after meditation several of them would gather in the large visitors' room and sing appropriate songs, to the accompaniment of various musical instruments. Usually the Swami listened from his own room to the singing, but occasionally, when able or even just in the right mood, he would ask to be taken downstairs to participate in it. After hearing a familiar song he might perhaps declare, “Ah, how many times we have heard Sri Ramakrishna sing that!” Or if the song had been about the Divine Mother, he might say something like this: “The Master used to sing, ‘Who knows what the Mother is? Even the six systems of philosophy have not been able to fathom Her!’” All present listened with rapt attention to the Swami's words. Sometimes, in the exuberance of his soul, he himself sang lines from a song of which the Master had been fond:

“Dive deep, O my mind, dive deep
 In the ocean of God's beauty.
 If you descend to the uttermost depths —
 There you will find the pearl of love....”

¹⁷ *Shivananda Vani*, I

And before he could finish singing he would be lost in deep meditation. Devotional music then transported him to Dakshineswar, and he was wont to say such as the following: “The Master often started kirtan accompanied by drums and cymbals, and we joined in. Sometimes he danced in ecstasy. It is impossible to describe his spiritual raptures; they were contagious. His ceaseless repetition of the Lord’s name made the place a heaven. In what joy did we pass our days with him!”¹⁸

Music at the math also reminded Mahapurush of Swamiji’s soulful voice, and he was apt to say: “Swamiji used to sing this. He himself would play the drum and lead the singing. He was so divinely handsome and put such spiritual fire into what he sang!” The love and respect which Mahapurush bore to Swamiji were too deep for words: they were the outcome of his personal experience and realization. Once in the course of conversation the Swami said: “While I was living with Swamiji at the Baranagore monastery, a most extraordinary thing happened. In those days we used to sleep in a large upstairs room of the monastery. We had very little bedding and all slept on the floor under one large mosquito net.”¹⁹ The Swami then narrated the following experience:

“One night I had fallen asleep beside Swamiji. There were also Swami Ramakrishnanda and others sleeping nearby. In the dead of night I suddenly awoke and found the whole inside of the mosquito net flooded with light.

¹⁸ *Shivananda Vani*, I

¹⁹ *Shivananda Vani*, II

Looking beside me for Swamiji, I could not find him, but in his place were a number of little Shivas lying asleep, all of them seven or eight year old boys, beautiful, of white complexion and with matted locks on their heads. It was the light of their bodies that illumined the room. This sight amazed me profoundly. At first I could not understand it at all; I thought it was an hallucination. Rubbing my eyes well, I looked again, and saw the same little sleeping Shivas. I just sat there, not knowing what to do. Aside from not wishing to lie down, I was afraid that if I fell asleep my feet might touch the Shivas. The whole night I spent more or less in meditation. When morning came I found Swamiji sleeping there as in the beginning of the night. Later in the morning, when I had told him everything, he laughed a great deal. Long after, I unexpectedly came across the Sanskrit hymn addressed to Shiva Vireswara, and in it I found Shiva described exactly as I had seen Him that night. Then I knew that I had had a true vision; it had revealed the true nature of Swamiji. He was born of the being of Shiva — that is what I saw in this vision.”²⁰

Mahapurush indeed adored Swamiji. If a devotee brought some special flowers, incense or sweets for Swami Shivananda, he would at once say, “Go, offer them in Swamiji’s room first.” While strolling on the verandah he invariably came to the door of Swamiji’s room, which was only a few steps from his own, and there he bowed down to the memory of Swamiji, saying, “Victory to Swamiji Maharaj!” Sometimes he entered Swamiji’s room with great trepidation and observed

²⁰ *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

carefully every little article in it. Once while looking at a group picture his eyes fell on his own figure, and he started laughing. "Eh, who is this *rogue* here?" he said. "This one became a saint, having been with the saints!" Speaking of the disciples of the Master who were called Ishvarakotis, he observed: "Swamiji, Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) and a few others belonged to that category. I was not so high, but now I also have become an Ishvarakoti through his grace."²¹ The Master had designated as Ishvarakotis those of his great disciples who were born perfect, possessed of some of the extraordinary characteristics of Divine Incarnations. They formed a class by themselves. To serve his own divine purpose the Master must have raised Mahapurush to that exalted status, and the Swami proved by his exalted life what he had become.

Sarada Devi, the saintly consort of Sri Ramakrishna, always occupied a very high place in the Order. Swami Shivananda's devotion and loyalty to her were perhaps surpassed only by his devotion and loyalty to the Master. Every now and then, especially on her birthday anniversaries, the Swami was accustomed to speak of her and of the greatness of her character. At once a wife and a nun, she was the foremost of the Master's disciples; and she represented his final word on the ideal of Indian womanhood. Sister Nivedita, who was privileged to know Sarada Devi, said: "In her, one sees realized that wisdom and sweetness to which the

²¹ *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

simplest of women may attain. And yet, the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood Her life is one long stillness of prayer.”²²

Once Mahapurushji's attendant introduced to him a certain man saying, “He has been blessed by the Holy Mother and is here to pay his respects to you.” The devotee saluted the Swami reverently, and as he arose with moist eyes and folded hands, Mahapurush affectionately inquired, “Well, my child, did you have the grace of the Mother?” When the devotee said “Yes,” the Swami observed: “You are very fortunate to have had the Mother's grace. You should worry no more. Is our Mother an ordinary woman? For the good of the world the Mother of the Universe embodied Herself (as our Mother), to give liberation to souls.”²³

On another occasion a woman devotee and her daughter came to the monastery at Belur to see the Swami. The daughter, a disciple of his, was very young—thirteen or fourteen years of age—with spiritual inclinations. The mother also was a very good woman. Instead of trying to stand in the daughter's way, she encouraged her in her spiritual pursuits and wished her to live the consecrated life of a nun. She pressed the Swami to bless the daughter and help her, so that she might be able to live up to her wish.

The Swami, as was his wont, showered his blessings upon the girl and addressing her said:

²² *The Master as I saw him.*

²³ *Shivananda Vani, I*

“Call upon God with great love. He is your father, mother, husband, friend and all. Now that you are going to school, you should, of course, mind your studies, keeping up, by all means, your spiritual practices such as the repetition of His name which you received from me. Whatever you may do, know this, my child, that the one purpose of life is to realize God. This world is short-lived and evanescent; God alone is the abiding reality. Try to be very pure. Purity is the basis of spiritual life. God manifests Himself in a pure, guileless heart.”²⁴

The Swami then spoke at length about the Holy Mother, picturing to the girl her unique character:

“Have you read the biography of the Holy Mother? She represented the ideal of the womanhood of this age. Hers was an extraordinary life. As an embodied person, although she seemed to have lived like an ordinary woman, she was, in reality, the Mother of the Universe—the Primal Creative Energy. The scriptures tell us about Dasha-Mahavidya the ten divine manifestations of the Mother—Kali, Tara, and so on. The Holy Mother was one of them. She was born specifically to help the Master in his divine mission, namely his work of establishing religion in the world. What will an ordinary man understand of her? We too in the beginning did not realize her greatness. As she was unassuming, concealing her divine powers, it was very difficult to know her as she really was. Only the Master knew her truly. Swamiji

²⁴ *Shivananda Vani*, I

knew her a little. When Swamiji decided to go to the West, it was only to her that he disclosed his plans, and with her blessings he crossed the ocean. The Mother blessed him from the bottom of her heart, saying, 'My son, may you return triumphant! May Saraswati, the Goddess of Wisdom, reside in your mouth!' Mother's blessings bore fruit; through them Swamiji conquered the world (by his message at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago). So profound was Swamiji's veneration for the Mother that he would even say that she was greater than the Master. The Master also once remarked, 'Woe unto the man upon whom she who lives at the concert room (meaning Holy Mother) frowns! Even I cannot save such a person!'

"The Mother was born in order to awaken the entire womankind of this world. Don't you see how after her advent an unprecedented awakening has come over women belonging to all countries—how women everywhere are up and doing to make their lives graceful, improving themselves in every way? This is just the prelude. The Vedic and Puranic ages gave birth to exemplary characters such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Sita, Savitri and others. This age will produce greater ones still. Today women are remarkably forward, taking their rightful places in domains of spirituality, politics, science, art and literature. They will be more so in the future. This is all the sport of the Lord, the subtle significance of which will never be grasped by the man in the street."²⁵

The woman devotee: "I myself know very little about the Mother. I have not read her life and teachings. Please tell us more about her. I am so eager to hear."

²⁵ *Shivanand Vani*, II

“The Swami: “The Mother was indeed the mother of all. What compassion and forgiveness—what unusual patience she had! How little of her have we understood! But she has graciously let us know this much; that she is really the Mother of the Universe. Nobody can know her unless she graciously reveals herself. At first Swami Yogananda and later Swami Saradananda cared for her, looking after her needs. I too had the blessed privilege of once cooking for her and feeding her. That was long ago at Jayarambati, a few years after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna.”²⁶

The Swami then feelingly recounted his brief three-day visit with the Holy Mother at Jayarambati. How like an affectionate mother did she move heaven and earth to provide for his comfort and happiness and those of his brother disciples who had accompanied him! How immensely he enjoyed every moment of his visit! He said: “In what great joy did we pass those three days with the Mother! Ah, what affection she showed us! From early morning till late at night she busied herself, looking after our comforts and needs. I lost my earthly mother at a very early age. I had almost forgotten what maternal love was, but at Jayarambati I had a taste of genuine maternal love.”²⁷

Profound was Mahapurushji’s love and respect for Swami Brahmananda, lovingly called Maharaj. On his death bed the latter had asked Mahapurush, who was to be his successor in the presidency of the Math and Mission, to look after the monks and

devotees of the Order. Often Mahapurush spoke of Maharaj with intense feeling, showing how much he missed him. These two great Swamis had been in the habit of comparing notes, exchanging ideas, and sharing in each other's spiritual experiences.

Once, on the birthday anniversary of Swami Brahmananda, Mahapurush observed to a large crowd of monks and devotees: "Today is a great day—the birthday of Sri Maharaj. Men like him belong to the category of the knowers of Brahman. For the good of the world, at long intervals, great souls like him are born, imbued with deep spiritual realizations. The entire world becomes blessed at the touch of their feet."²⁸

During the forenoon that day, many kinds of food of which Maharaj had been fond were offered in worship at his temple. With great devotion Mahapurush took, with the tip of his finger, a little of the offered food, saying, "Maharaj himself liked many kinds of food and enjoyed feeding others. Ah! When he visited the monastery at Belur, it would be a mart of joy! How many people would gather! Meditation and japa, worship and study, devotional singing, feasting and merrymaking became the order of the day! There were waves of joy at the monastery. Those were indeed blessed days. Only a knower of Brahman like Maharaj could give joy to people in so many ways."²⁹

In the course of conversation that same day, Mahapurush asked someone to bring him a picture

of Swami Brahmananda. When given this, he touched it to his head and placed it over his heart. Later, looking intently at the picture, he said: "See what a regal appearance he has! Whether seated or standing he has the bearing of a king."³⁰ Again, the Swami declared with great feeling: "How much Maharaj did and how hard he laboured for this monastery! His memory is associated with every brick of it. He shed his life's blood to build it up; even now he is doing the same. I am only his servant seated here, bearing his sandals on my head I do as he guides me. Ah! What regard and affection Swamiji had for Maharaj! Do you know who Maharaj was? He was the cowherd playmate of Sri Krishna."³¹ On that day Swami Shivananda seemed literally beside himself with thoughts of Maharaj.

Worshipped in India as an Incarnation of God, Sri Krishna has always exercised a tremendous influence on Hindu life and culture, and even today represents a great spiritual force. There are several popular religious festivals celebrating his birth and certain episodes of his life. On those occasions, and at various other times too, Mahapurush was in the habit of thinking of Sri Krishna, repeating some of his many names, such as Gopala, Madhusudana, Govinda; or perhaps he would talk to the monks and devotees of the Order about Sri Krishna's teachings. Often he read from the sacred pages of the Srimad Bhagavatam, which tells at length of Sri Krishna's life and philosophy.

³⁰⁻³¹ *Shivananda Vani*, I

Even as a child, Sri Krishna attracted around him a large number of admirers and devotees, among whom the gopis or milkmaids of Vrindavan occupied the foremost place. He was the idol of their hearts; to him they dedicated body, mind and soul. Their love and devotion for him have no parallel in religious history. The story of their spiritual relationship with him, too deep for words, is a rare document in mystical literature.

Once while speaking of the milkmaids, the Swami said: "What love they had! They could not bear to see Sri Krishna walk, lest his feet become hurt. 'O Beloved! When thou goest forth tending cows in the pastures, we grow very much concerned, thinking thy lotus-like tender feet may be scratched by brambles or gravel.'" ³² Again, the Swami declared: "What earnest longing and devotion the gopis had! The moment they heard the music of Sri Krishna's flute, in whatever condition they might be, they at once ran to him, losing all consciousness of the outer world. For instance, one milkmaid, engaged in milking a cow, would stop her work and then and there hasten to him. Another milkmaid, serving meal to her people, would do the same. Those who failed to reach Sri Krishna's side became automatically absorbed in meditation upon him, at the very place where they happened to be. They had no thought except of Sri Krishna.

"How exquisite is the Gopi Gita! Swamiji used melodiously to recite verses from that book.

³² *Sri Sri Mahapurushjir Katha*

It has such a beautiful choice of words and expressions! In how many ways and how many times did Sri Krishna protect his devotees! The milkmaids knew very well that Sri Krishna, the Lord, was really the Supreme Spirit, residing in the hearts of all beings. 'Thou art the Indwelling Spirit present in the hearts of all creatures. For the protection of the world Thou hast embodied Thyself as man in the clan of the Yadavas, in answer to Brahma's prayers.' " 33

One Janmashtami Day, the birthday anniversary of Sri Krishna, as the Swami got up from bed he saluted Sri Krishna again and again. After that he sang songs describing the Lord's nativity. Addressing some monks, he said: "Today properly worship Sri Krishna, the darling of Devaki. At night, I understand, they will perform homa, the fire ritual, and read the Bhagavatam at the shrine in connection with his birthday celebration. What spiritual raptures befell the Master on a day like this! Born as men, we had the privilege of witnessing so many of the sports of the Lord. Glory be unto the Lord! Glory be unto God!" 34

Many people picture Sri Krishna only as a God of love and beauty, playing his flute, beloved of the milkmaids of Vrindavan, and so on. They ignore Sri Krishna the exponent and exemplar of selfless activity. Knowing the importance of impressing the monks with the need of detachment in all action, Mahapurush often stressed this aspect of Krishna. But most of all he extolled Sri Krishna,

33, 34: *Sri Sri Mahapurushjir Katha*

the charioteer and counsellor of Arjuna, who expounded in the Bhagavad Gita a mighty, all-comprehensive philosophy destined to help man become strong and solve his problems. Mahapurush often warned the monks and devotees sternly against ignoring this Sri Krishna, who could inspire the soul to fight. He would quote Sri Krishna and say, "Your salvation lies in your own hands! Do not weep and depress yourself."³⁵ He emphasized the need of energy, courage and manliness.

At that very time the Bhagavad Gita was being studied at the math. Someone mentioned this fact to the Swami, and in the course of conversation he quoted the following verse from the Gita: "I am the goal and the support: the Lord and the witness: the abode, the refuge and the friend. I am the origin and the dissolution: the ground, the storehouse and the imperishable seed."³⁶ Commenting on this verse, the Swami said, "It is a favourite of mine; it is splendid! Herein lies the speciality of the Gita: the Lord expressed everything in the direct form—no hiding nor quibbling. He declared in clear and unmistakable language that he was the goal."³⁷

The Swami then repeated the verse of the Gita which speaks of "That on gaining which one thinks there is no greater gain and wherein established one is not moved by even the heaviest sorrows."³⁸ Having quoted this, he said, "It is time for me to move to the realm where there is nothing but joy—none of the sixfold physical

limitations³⁹ such as birth, decay and death. My mind wants to rush there. Whenever I close my eyes, that realm flashes forth.”⁴⁰

Christmas Eve, celebrating the birth of Christ, was invariably observed at the math and other centres regularly and with great devotion. On such occasions Mahapurush inevitably thought of Jesus, the Crucified Saviour. Filled with the Christ spirit, he used to talk to the monks and devotees concerning Christ's life and teachings.

One Christmas day a large number of these gathered at Mahapurushji's room to pay their respects to him. The Swami seemed to be in a very happy and spiritual mood. Affectionately he greeted all with a “Merry Christmas.” He then narrated in detail how they had first celebrated at Antpur (West Bengal) and later at the Baranagore monastery the birth of Christ. We shall reproduce here the substance of the Swami's words:

“Shortly after the mahasamadhi of Sri Ramakrishna we were invited by Swami Premananda's mother to come and spend a few days in their home at Antpur. Swamiji took all of us there. At that time we had great dispassion in our hearts. Overcome with grief and restlessness at the passing away of the Master, we were engaged in severe austerity, study and discussion. Day and night we had one thought as to how we would realize God and have peace in our minds. One night, according to our usual custom, we were all meditating around a dhuni fire, and the meditation was long and deep.

³⁹ Birth, existence, growth, transformation, decay and death

⁴⁰ *Shivananda Vani*, II

After a while, all on a sudden Swamiji became filled, as it were, with the Christ spirit and began speaking about Jesus and his life. He recounted with such force and clarity the narrative of Christ's superhuman spiritual discipline and renunciation, his experience of oneness with the Heavenly Father and other such incidents that we were surprised. We felt as if Jesus himself were speaking through Swamiji's mouth, an unspeakable bliss flooding our souls. We seemed to be convinced then that somehow or other we must realize God and that all else was in vain. Strange as it seemed, we discovered later that that evening was the Christmas eve.

“Jesus was a prince among monks, a radiant embodiment of renunciation. One finds it very difficult to understand his divine life and superb teaching unless one is a true monk. We met Sri Ramakrishna and associated with him; that is why we can understand a little of Jesus. How will a man of the world, engrossed in the world understand anything about him? Even those who profess to be his followers, especially missionaries and preachers of these days, have not been able to comprehend him properly. Most of these people do not know wherein lies Jesus's distinctiveness and greatness, because they lack the spiritual qualities of renunciation, austerity and sincerity. Preaching, unless it is backed and reinforced by character, is never effective. That is why the results of a hundred and fifty years' preaching of Christianity in India have not been very satisfactory. How many people in India have realized God through these preachings? Renunciation, detachment and purity—all these form the foundation of spiritual life. Jesus himself said: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. It is the seeing of God which is the goal of spiri-

tual life. Religion is realization. For instance, a big religious organization is formed with membership of thousands of people. It does not, by any means, mean any achievement in the realm of the Spirit, although it may have value from a political and commercial standpoint. Swamiji said: 'I should feel my labours compensated if I can help even ten people spiritually.' The so-called missionaries and preachers have among themselves many who are talented and scholarly; but if they possessed renunciation and austerity as preached by Jesus they could have done better service to man."⁴¹

The Swami said many beautiful things on that day, and the conversation went on for a long time. A monk of the Order asked: "Maharaj, Sri Ramakrishna declared that miracles are a handicap to one's spiritual progress, but we find on the contrary that the life of Jesus was full of miracles. Jesus raised the dead, healed sicknesses and made various similar phenomenal demonstrations. Besides, he transmitted his power to his twelve apostles and commissioned them to perform similar miracles. We are at a loss to understand this."

The Swami remained quiet for a while and then said:

"The Master was right when he said that spiritual aspirants become sidetracked, nay, lost for a while, if they direct their minds to supernatural powers. The Mother told the Master that powers are something that should be shunned as filth. But in the case of Jesus, the miracles he performed were done not with the idea of showing off, but out of compassion to redress

^{41,42} *Shivananda Vani*, II

the sufferings of men. It is mentioned in the Bible that Jesus, while giving sight to the blind and rendering a leper whole by a touch, cautioned them not to make it public. He did not do those things for name and fame or popular applause. The scriptures say that knowers of Brahman, if they survive after illumination, are supremely compassionate and move in the world, doing good to men; they do not have any other desire or wish.

“Furthermore, Jesus was not an ordinary illumined soul. He was an incarnation of God. He merged his identity with God, the Heavenly Father. In his case, to perform miracles was neither unnatural nor wrong. While common people think of those acts as extraordinary or impossible, they are as easy as breathing with the Divine Incarnations. They require no effort at all to do those things. By a mere wish of theirs the impossible becomes possible. In certain cases, Jesus exercised supernatural powers in order to create in the minds of unbelievers a faith in the existence of God. It is often difficult to comprehend the subtle significance of the actions of Divine Incarnations.

“To heal by a touch the sickness of the body is not so phenomenal; it is rather an easy thing. Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated greater supernatural powers when by a touch he gave God-vision or samadhi to men. The greatest miracle consists in directing the mind of man in an instant to God by attenuating the layers of his crystallized impressions stored from birth to birth. No other Divine Incarnation did this. Oh, what marvellous things did we not see the Master do! It makes our hair stand on end to think of them! He could certainly play with the human mind and fashion it the way he liked. By a touch of his the sickness of the mind could

be cured. What stupendous spiritual powers did he possess! Outwardly speaking, he behaved like a common man, but it was the Omnipotent God that functioned in his body."

A German lady, a devotee of the Lord, who happened to be at the math, saluted the Swami. After greeting her in the usual way, the Swami inquired, "How did you like yesterday's Christmas Eve service here?"

The lady replied: "I immensely enjoyed it. I had never experienced such joy before. In the West, Christmas calls for more fun, feasting and merrymaking, and the whole continent is swept by this. The reading of the Bible in churches is more or less routine work, lacking in earnestness. Millions of dollars are spent in merrymaking. External pomp cannot satisfy the heart. That is why last year on Christmas Eve at midnight I sincerely prayed to Jesus that he give me at least once the experience of the pure joy of Christmas. He certainly must have answered my prayer. This year I experienced the true joy of Christmas here and my heart is full."

The Swami: "Our worship is an act of devotion. Our Christmas celebration is sattvik; love, devotion, faith and soulful prayer are its special characteristics."

The Lady: "Was the Lord Jesus a Jew?"

The Swami: "He was neither a Jew nor a Gentile. He belonged to a category far above all these: he was an incarnation of the power of God. He was born as man in this world to save the souls of men."

Mahapurush had great love and admiration for Buddha, the Light of Asia and of the world, as well as for Buddha's philosophy of life. The Compassionate One's birthday anniversaries, observed at the math by special reading, discussion and workship, have always been important occasions. Once on Buddha's birthday the Swami said, "Yes, it is indeed a great day, the thrice-blessed day." Buddha was born on the day of the full moon of the Indian month Vaishakh (April-May), and he attained illumination and passed away on that same day; this accounts for its being called the thrice-blessed day. The Swami asked a monk, "Well, did you sing the song—'Peace I seek, but where can peace be found? Whence have I come, and whither shall I go?'" The monk replied, "No, Maharaj," and the Swami remarked, "It is an excellent song, composed by Girish Babu." He then himself sang the song, after which he said: "How beautifully Girish Babu worded it! He got the idea from the Lalita Vistara (a life of Buddha). Buddha, then Prince Siddhartha, was making merry, when some angels flying through space sang that song. It startled Buddha: a sudden awakening and change came over him. He asked, 'Who is singing this song? I know it well; that is the song I have always known.' He could not any more give his heart to enjoyment; he remained continuously in a state of dispassion. King Sudhodhana, Buddha's father, tried various means to divert his son's mind; he placed many temptations before him, thinking that he would thus be drawn again to the pleasures of the world. All efforts

proved futile. Then one day Buddha left the palace.”⁴³

While recounting Buddha's austerities in search of Truth, the Swami was reminded of his own itinerant days, and of the life he and his brother disciples had lived in the first monastery of the Order. He said, “That was indeed a time! What renunciation, dispassion and austerity we had! When God comes to this world as man, then flows a current of spirituality. Many are blessed by getting the light of knowledge. Many attain emancipation. We too once discussed Buddhist philosophy. That was long ago.”⁴⁴ Mahapurush then spoke of his trip to Bodh Gaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment, telling at length of the spiritual experiences and the exaltation that had come there to himself while in company with Swamiji. A monk observed, “In Bodh Gaya they have white marble lotuses to mark the place where Buddha walked up and down (after attaining illumination).” Mahapurush rejoined, “Yes, after illumination Buddha experienced so much joy that he walked up and down the whole night. He walked around in an ecstatic mood, enjoying the bliss of Self-realization.”⁴⁵

Another day, while talking of Buddha, Mahapurush said: “Ah! Such an intellect and such a heart are not to be met with anywhere! It was all the doing of God. Our Master, however, was Buddha, Shankara and Chaitanya—all combined in one person. Everything is extraordinary at this

⁴³ *Sri Sri Mahapurushjir Katha*

⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ *Shivananda Vani, I*

time. Glory be unto the Lord! Gracious Master, please bring peace to all. May peace, well-being and good betide India—and the world! No other country has such an ideal of renunciation as India. If India survives, then the world will do so.”⁴⁶

The conversation then turned to Buddha's spiritual practices and his emancipation—nirvana. In order to bring home to those present what nirvana is, the Swami sang the following song by Swamiji:

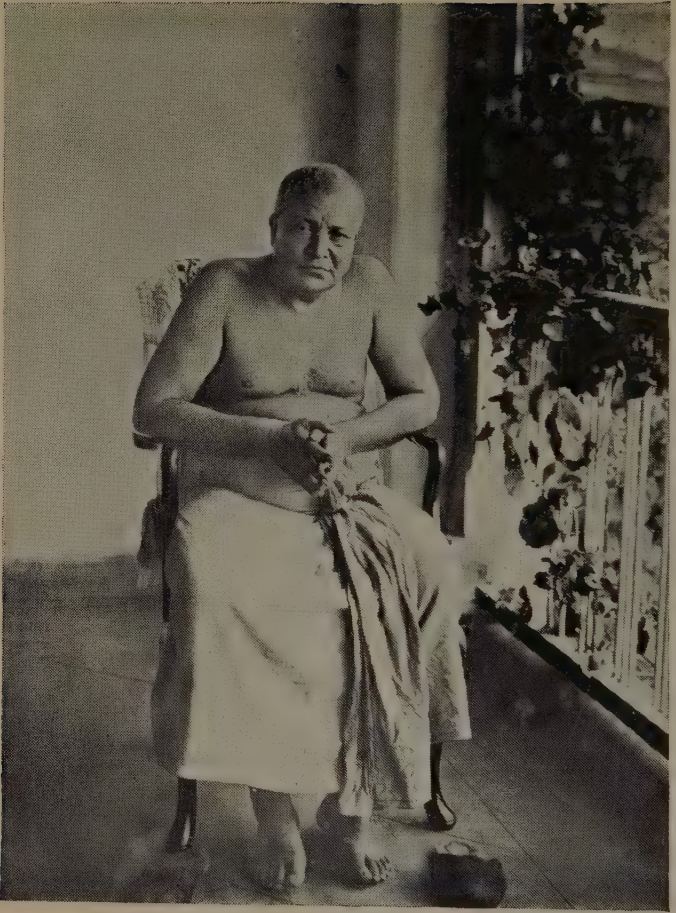
“Lo! The sun is not, nor the comely moon,
 All light extinct; in the great void of space
 Floats shadowlike the image-universe.
 In the void of mind involute, there floats
 The fleeting universe, rises and floats,
 Sinks again, ceaseless, in the current ‘I.’
 Slowly, slowly, the shadow-multitude
 Entered the primal womb, and flowed ceaseless,
 The only current, the ‘I am,’ ‘I am.’
 Lo! ‘T’is stopped, even that current flows no
 more,
 Void merged into void,—beyond speech and
 mind!

Whose heart understands, he verily does.”

After singing this song the Swami was quiet for a while, seemingly in a deep spiritual mood. He then said, “Splendid! All is still (in samadhi).” Nirvana is not extinction, as many mistakenly suppose. It is only another name for samadhi or illumination, an exalted state of consciousness, beyond all the relative categories of time, space, causation, name and form. There is no difference between nirvana and samadhi.

⁴⁶ *Sri Sri Mahapurushjir Katha*

In concluding this chapter we should like to say how fully we realize that the many incidents and festivals we have told of, and the many conversations, songs and sacred texts we have quoted from—all in trying to give an idea of the varying spiritual moods of Swami Shivananda—can only prove inadequate to our purpose. For as the Swami was a great knower of God in many of His aspects, this phase of his life was, of course, incomparably glorious, rich beyond words. Everything that has been written here should therefore be considered merely a pale suggestion of the reality—that sublime life of ceaseless worship, communion with God, and ecstasy.



Belur Math
1926

CHAPTER XII

A GLORIOUS CHAPTER

Age has its limitation. It diminishes physical and mental vigour and brings on all kinds of ailments. An illumined soul, if he lives to be old, though not exactly free from these limitations, is, however, unaffected by them. Most of the time he lives in a blessed superconscious state, absolutely detached from his body, where the pairs of opposites do not matter. Even at the time when he comes down to the normal plane and attends to the routine of his everyday life, he maintains an attitude which is quite different from that of an ordinary man of the world. He feels the presence of God everywhere and sees His hand in everything. He takes his trials and tribulations philosophically. He bears his aches and pains calmly, resignedly. Age and its infirmities cannot, in any way, damp the spirit of a God-man or pull him down. As a matter of fact, they heighten, by contrast, the beauty and majesty of his character.

This can truly be said of Swami Shivananda, who lived to be more than eighty years old. His closing years, marked by protracted spells of illness, represent the most glorious chapter of his career. Ill and feeble in body, he constantly dwelt in God, radiating a joy and peace that were extraordinary and contagious. Nothing could mar the seraphic smile that ever lit up his face. Irrespective of physical conditions, he faithfully continued his meditations and labours of love, bringing the light

of spiritual understanding and comfort to many a seeker. More than once he remarked that he felt the living presence of God with every breath of his nostrils; he clearly saw Him within—in his heart and outside—in all men. His work of spiritual ministration—his sole and passionate occupation—was therefore something more than just sympathy and compassion; it was exalted worship—worship of the Divine in man; and he carried on this worship without stint till the end of his life. While recounting the narrative of the Swami's life we have tried to show this in the foregoing chapters, and hope to elaborate on this more fully here.

Mahapurushji's physical decline commenced with the passing away of Swami Saradananda, who had been the secretary of the Order and one of its foremost executives since its inception. In August, 1927, Swami Saradananda suffered a stroke, and within a few days of this attack left the world, to the dismay of the monks and devotees. His death was a great loss which deeply moved Mahapurushji, undermining his health altogether. Since then, he seemed to have lost interest in life and to have become more and more indrawn. It was not long before he himself fell alarmingly ill, so much so that the monks at the math became apprehensive that he might not recover at all.

A trip to Benares, which meant a change of climate and environment, helped the Swami for a while. He seemed to recuperate encouragingly in a few days; all concerned were delighted to notice this change for the better. The City of Shiva, to which the Swami had always been partial, evoked

in his mind old spiritual associations, and he enjoyed every moment of his stay there. During this brief sojourn in Benares the Swami was blessed by a number of unusual spiritual experiences which we have mentioned elsewhere. These kept the Swami's mind completely absorbed; he seemed to be sublimely happy, moving in a different realm away from the noise, bustle and sordidness of this mundane existence. But the after-effect of these experiences on his feeble, convalescent body was far from good.

As was to be expected, on his return to Belur the Swami fell ill again, and after that his ill health continued, with all sorts of complications. The Swami had always been in the habit of going out for walks for fresh air and exercise. In the beginning of 1928 he began to find walking difficult; even short walks within the compound of the monastery would make him dizzy and his feet would tremble. Still, for a while he continued his walks, leaning on a cane. Very soon because of physical incapacity he had to stop going out altogether, and he missed these strolls very much. Often he had painful asthmatic spells attended by bad colds. On top of this he developed symptoms of high blood pressure, because of which heavy clothes became uncomfortable even in winter. He wore his usual cotton ochre cloth and a thin flannel jacket. At night he used a light bed cover.

During the first half of 1929 the Ramakrishna Math and Mission passed through one of its worst crises. Certain disobedient members, deviating from the high ideal that the Order stands for, tried

in all possible ways to undermine its activities and throw it into disrepute. By their destructive propaganda and behaviour they stirred up forces which disturbed very much the peace and even tenor of the life of the monks at Belur and elsewhere. The Swami, as the spiritual head, had to bear the brunt of this ordeal. In the midst of all these trying conditions he maintained his usual calmness and faith in the Lord. His patience and forgiveness toward the miscreants were exceptional. Through the grace of the Lord the crisis that had been so disconcerting and upsetting was over, and in time all quieted down. But the strain, the wear and tear that this incident caused, proved very costly to the Swami's feeble body and he seemed to be failing fast. To the enquiring monks and devotees he would often admit this. "But my realizations", he would add, "are wonderful. I am enjoying great happiness. Two things are taking place simultaneously in this"—and he pointed to himself. "One is happening in this body; the other, in the soul. On the body side, there is illness and discomfort; from the standpoint of the soul, there is pure joy. I derive great bliss from observing this and thinking of it."¹

Ill health, instead of depressing the Swami and making him too body-conscious, drove him more and more within. The result was definite spiritual advance with profound experiences, which the Swami would often describe to the monks and devotees of the Order. He delighted in those experiences; they opened the flood-gates of his spiritual

¹ *Shivananda Vani*, I

emotions and plunged him into raptures. But his body, being of clay, was too fragile and weak to stand the strain. It often suffered violently as a consequence. Speaking of one such experience the Swami was heard to remark: "One day while I was listening to the songs of the Mother, it was as if a robber entered my body and completely ransacked it. Sri Ramakrishna used to have this kind of ecstasy. However, don't think I can stand what he could. I am only his son and servant."² And then he added, "I shall at the most live three or four years more. Only the shell of this body is left."³

The doctor who was treating the Swami advised that he should remain in his room, avoiding the strain of going up and down the stairs. Never again, except on rare occasions when he was carried in a chair, did the Swami leave the first floor of the main monastery building. This, of course, meant a decisive change in his routine of living. Even though his movements were restricted, he continued his work of helping and instructing people. By looking at him and hearing him talk one would never have thought he was sick at all. Most of the time his room was crowded with people—monks, devotees and visitors—and he received all kindly.

In order to give a graphic picture of the Swami's life at this time, we should like to reproduce here some conversations⁴ from the diary of a monk and attendant. It was the end of June, 1932. For some time there had been no rain. The heat was rather trying, causing much suffering to birds,

²⁻⁴ *Shivananda Vani*, II

beasts and human beings. Then early one morning suddenly it started raining—it was a veritable downpour. This pleased Mahapurushji very much. With folded hands he saluted the Mother of the Universe and said, “Mother, how can Thy creation live unless Thou comes to its rescue?” When the rain subsided he looked around, and feeling compassion for the starved birds, instructed the attendant to throw some rice grains on the adjoining roof. A large number of the feathered species of different sizes and colours came down from all directions and perched there. The Swami was beside himself with joy to see them feasting, and remarked, “I can’t go out any more. This is how I enjoy myself.”

After his usual rest at noon that day the Swami sat silent and indrawn for a while, and then asked the attendant to read a little from the Srimad Bhagavatam. That section of the twelfth chapter was read where Sri Krishna told Uddhava about the glories of holy association. The Swami listened with rapt attention. Said the Lord: “O Uddhava, nothing attracts me—neither concentration, knowledge or righteousness, nor study or scriptures, austerity or renunciation, nor charity or humanitarian acts like the digging of wells, lakes, etc., nor observance of rituals, pilgrimage or self-discipline—none of these, as does holy association, for it has the power to destroy all attachments.”

After hearing this verse the Swami remarked:

“Ah! How beautifully expressed! Look here, the Lord Himself says that holy association is unique—without any parallel. On account of

holy association one attains the most covetable state of desirelessness. It destroys attachments at their very roots and brings one very close to God. How much spiritual discipline can man perform with his limited capacity? Besides, can one realize Him by spiritual discipline? God favours His devotee. It is love and devotion that please Him. He manifests Himself in the heart of a devotee who is sincere and earnest.

“Holy company is so effective that it generates love of God. Who is genuinely holy? Only he in whose heart is installed the Lord. One is blessed with the company and grace of a truly holy man as a result of good deeds performed in many lives. Holy association can change the course of one’s entire life and bring about results that last for a very long time. We know it from our own experience. For instance, we would spend an hour or two with the Master—sometimes there would be very little talk or exchange of words. The effect of his association lasted for days. We remained in a state of spiritual intoxication, as it were, absorbed in the thought of God. He was God Himself—a Divine Incarnation. One gracious glance of his gave a person the experience of samadhi. By a mere touch he could vouchsafe God-vision to a man.

“One is bound to have one’s spiritual impulses roused if one comes in contact with an illumined soul. How do we know whether a person has truly realized God or not? Herein is the test: the presence of a man of God will evoke spiritual thoughts and emotions. In the Vaishnava literature there is a beautiful passage the import of which is: ‘Know him to be a man of God—the foremost of devotees—by meeting whom one spontaneously feels like repeating the name of the Lord.’ Just as in approaching fire

one feels the heat, in the same way one is filled with the thoughts of God by meeting a man of God. 'Just as the insect finds itself lodged upon the altar because of its association with flowers, similarly the company of the holy one redeems sinners.' It is not that in this world one needs holy company only in adversity, trial and tribulation; those who are in affluent circumstances, brought up in the lap of luxury, need holy company all the more. Even such people, infatuated by sense pleasures, may lose their interest in the so called evanescent things of this world, if they luckily happen to be in holy company. As a result, they too may be directed towards God and be finally blessed by attaining Him, the source of abiding joy. Many well-to-do people came to Sri Ramakrishna, who graciously changed the course of their minds and gave them a taste of divine communion."

Blessed is the person who has the privilege of being constantly with a holy man, a man of God, and rendering him personal service. It is a privilege that comes to one as a result of unusual good deeds done in this life or in lives past. In the first place, being with a holy man is like living in a fort; it affords all the necessary protections and safeguards from temptations. Besides, it gives one the opportunity to observe the holy man at close quarters and to hear him in person talk about God and spiritual experience. But one may miss the blessings of holy association, if one neglects his daily spiritual practice and takes holy association lightly.

Because of illness Mahapurushiji used sometimes in those days to have more than one attendant who cared for him constantly. Deeply interested in their welfare, he helped them by precept as well

as example, warning them again and again against this aforesaid danger.

For instance, to an attendant one night the Swami said:

“Look here, you are serving me. That’s very good. The Master is very gracious to you, making you serve one of his sons. But my child, while you do the service, you should keep up your spiritual practice. Regular meditation and devotions will help you realize who the Master is. It will be your ruin if you think of me just as a man. Bear this in mind: intense spiritual practice is necessary in order for one to see the Divine in man. Steady repetition of the name of the Lord along with meditation will purify the mind, and in a mind that is pure will arise spiritual emotions and feelings.

“We met Sri Ramakrishna, associated with him and received his grace. And yet he made us go through such severe spiritual disciplines. We too at first didn’t understand that he was God Himself, born to bring deliverance to the world. Gradually, through spiritual discipline we became grounded in that knowledge. Of course, nothing can be attained without divine grace. That the Master is God Himself, the Supreme Being, the Lord of the universe, we have come to know in course of time. He himself has graciously revealed what he really is.

“Do japa at the dead of night. You will achieve quick results. Your whole heart and soul will be flooded with joy. You will have so much joy that you will not feel like ceasing your japa. For example, to care for me you have to keep awake every night. Why not sit down and tell your beads when it is convenient? You don’t have chores to attend to all the time. Perhaps, once in a great while, your actual help is needed.

Here is your opportunity. Do japa wholeheartedly. Do you understand? Don't while away your time, my child. Dive deep into Him while repeating His name; it will not do for you just to skim the surface. The little spiritual practice that you do, do it with great sincerity. Then you will have peace.

"The Master used to sing: 'O my mind, say Kali and plunge into the profound depths of the ocean of the heart, the storehouse of all precious things.' Whatever one does one must do wholeheartedly in order to enjoy. The Lord looks at a person's heart and sincerity, and not at the amount of time he puts into his spiritual practice. Regular meditation and devotions at stated hours purify the mind and thus one becomes grounded in a particular idea. Steady practice is what is needed. The Lord says in the Gita: 'The mind can, indeed, be controlled by steadfast practice and dispassion.'⁵ Call upon Him earnestly with tears in your eyes and continue your practice steadfastly. You will see that the power of Brahman, now asleep and dormant like a coiled up snake, will wake up, opening the way to the bliss supreme. All is accomplished when the Mother, the energy of Brahman, is pleased. Says the Chandi: 'She, the giver of all boons, being pleased, bestows spiritual emancipation on men.'⁶ She is ever ready to give. Who is willing to take? If one sincerely asks of Her, She certainly gives—devotion, illumination and all.

"You have renounced your hearth and home with the idea of realizing God. That is your life's purpose. See that you don't forget the principal thing. Struggle hard and install the Lord in your heart by your steady, devout spiritual practice. Then you will have nothing but

⁵ VI, 35

⁶ I, 56

joy—unalloyed, continuous joy. All bodies have their death. How long will my body last? It has become old. Any day it may pass on. Then all will appear dark to you. But if through spiritual practice you have the vision of your Ishta (the chosen form of the Lord), then you will see that the guru and the Ishta are identical and that the guru is ever established in the temple of the heart. There is no death for the guru with the disintegration of his gross material body. I am saying all this because I love you. My only prayer is for your true well-being.

“You are with me, nursing my sick body day and night. That’s good. But if you think that you alone are serving me and doing something to boast of, you commit a great mistake. Do you understand? Does service mean simply waiting upon me and caring for my body? No, that is not it. They also serve me and are very dear to me who are far away, devotedly carrying on the work of the Lord, and sincerely trying to establish Him in their hearts through spiritual practice and work. I am pleased when the Lord is pleased by service. ‘The world is pleased when He is pleased.’ By doing the work of the Lord they will get the same results.”

We have noted that Mahapurushji took keen interest in the activities of the Order, encouraging monks and devotees in their respective lines of service and giving them valuable suggestion and advice. Even at the time when he was old, ill and weak he manifested the same interest. He was a constant source of inspiration to all.

It was about the spring of the year 1932. One afternoon at about three a monk brought a distinguished devotee of Calcutta to see the Swami, and

the conversation⁷ turned upon the centenary of Sri Ramakrishna's birth, which would fall in 1936. The monk in question was one of the enthusiastic members of the Order, who seriously thought about the great occasion and had big plans for its celebration.

Wishing to discuss the matter with the Swami and have his blessing and suggestion, the monk said: "The centenary will, of course, be variously observed in hundreds of cities, towns and villages all over India, extending over several days. Arrangements will also be made for it to be observed abroad, in countries of Europe and America. The special feature of the centenary will be to herald broadcast the universal teachings of the Master. We have also plans to hold exhibitions, displaying the art and culture of India, as a part of our programme. We are likewise thinking of convening a parliament of religions, in which delegates of different religions from various parts of the world will be invited to participate. Besides, we want to publish a memorial set of volumes discussing the culture, philosophy, and religion of India, with chapters contributed by a hundred distinguished scholars of the country. At present we shall start with this broad plan and gradually expand the details, in consultation with you, as we get response from the public."

The Swami was delighted beyond words to hear about the plans for the centenary and said: "That's a very auspicious resolve. It would be a splendid thing. The message of the Master, who

⁷ *Shivananda Vani*, II

is the ideal of this age, will spread far and wide, benefiting countless souls. Think of the Master and go ahead with your plans in full enthusiasm.”

The monk rejoined: “An immense sum will be needed for the purpose. Our greatest worry is wherefrom will this money come.”

The Swami: “The necessary funds will pour in, in due course. Don't worry on that score. This is the work of the Lord. Does His work ever lack in anything? Have full faith in Him—indubitable faith. He Himself will manage His work; we are simply His instruments. You will see that things will miraculously shape themselves in ways unthought of.”

The monk earnestly appealed to Mahapurushji for his blessing so that plans might materialize and the coming centenary become a success. At this the Swami grew quite excited and remarked with great feeling: “My blessing! It is my Father's (Master's) work! Who am I to bless it? I am his servant and slave. I assure you, everything will be all right; it is bound to be a great success.” Saying this the Swami became absorbed in his own thought and fell silent. His mind seemed to have moved to a different realm. All present were filled with an indescribable awe and inspiration by the Swami's words of assurance. After a while, as the monk and the devotees were about to leave, he said calmly: “Take something from me to start the centenary celebration fund.” He then asked the attendant to bring ten rupees from his purse and himself gave the sum to the monk, saying: “Go ahead, have no worry. Through his grace you will not lack funds. All will go well.”

When all were gone, the Swami fell silent again, drifting into his usual deep spiritual mood. Towards dusk, as the attendant dropped in, the Swami looked at him and remarked: "The centenary celebration of Sri Ramakrishna will be a magnificent affair. It will far surpass the plans they have drawn up. I have deeply thought over it. The ideas and ideals the Master embodied will sweep the whole country. This body of mine will not last that long, but you will see what a stupendous thing it will be. He himself is back of all these plans."

At about 8-30 in the evening a senior monk of the Order came to offer his respects to Mahapurushji and said: "Today you had a good crowd in your room. I tried to get in twice during the day, but did not succeed because of the crowd. It must have been a strenuous day for you. How is your health?" In reply Mahapurushji said: "You ask about my body? To speak the truth, most of the time I am not even aware that I have a body. Of course, when you make inquiries I have to say something; otherwise who thinks about the body? You are here; devotees drop in. I talk about the Lord, and the rest of the time I think about His grace. That gladdens my heart. I am ready to go back to Him. He alone knows why He is not calling me yet. Sometimes I cogitate: how strange is His sport! Look at our great Swamiji—how young he was snatched away! If he were in the flesh, he could be continuing so much of His work! Look again at Maharaj—he was also taken away! And yet He has left me here for His work.

I am nothing in comparison with them. Only He knows what His wish is."

The monk said: "Maharaj, as long as you live we are the ones who are benefited. How many devotees come here for peace and comfort! We are so happy because of your presence. His Order is functioning with you as the centre. Most of the direct disciples of the Master are gone, but he has kept you here for our guidance and training."

In his eagerness to help people the Swami never thought of himself—of his body, sleep, food or rest. To the numberless men and women who constantly sought his presence for peace and comfort he gave himself, his time and energy, completely. His compassionate heart throbbed with the heart-beats of all. He deeply felt for everyone in distress and difficulty, irrespective of class, creed, colour or race. He had nothing but words of cheer and hope for those who were in difficulty. We have shown this extensively before in the foregoing chapters. We shall mention here two more touching incidents,⁸ which bring this out beautifully.

One day to the monastery at Belur came a woman devotee whose only child had been seriously ill. All available medical care was tried with no result; the child was failing fast. Eventually the doctors gave up all hope of his recovery. The mother, frantic and not knowing where to turn, came to the Swami, thinking that perhaps he would be able to cure her son. With tears in her eyes she implored the Swami to come to her rescue, saying,

⁸ *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

“Father, kindly say just once that my child will be whole again.” For a while Mahapurushji patiently listened to the mother’s sad recital and then said, “If it be the will of the Lord, he will recover.”

A few days later the sick child succumbed, plunging the mother into a sea of grief. Seeking relief and consolation, the mother one day ran to the monastery at Belur and was brought to the Swami. Addressing him she said accusingly, “Father, you told me that my son would be well. Why did he then die? How shall I live without him?” Giving vent to her suppressed feelings and repeating her complaints she cried piteously. Mahapurushji tried as much as he could to console her and then said: “Mother, I knew that your son would not live. You are the mother; how could I tell you that your son would die? That’s why I spoke the way I did. Don’t cry, mother. May the Lord wipe away the sorrows of your heart. Look upon the Lord as your son. He will graciously fulfil all your needs and bring heavenly peace into your soul.” Strangely enough, these words of assurance and blessing from the Swami comforted the bereaved mother very much. We know that afterwards because of the Swami’s influence a revolutionary change came into her life.

Another day, as the Swami was seated in his room absorbed in his own thought, some strangers belonging to an aristocratic family of Calcutta were brought to him. In the party was a woman who seemed to be very much upset. On inquiry it was found out that she too had lost her young, only son.

Overpowered with grief and sorrow she sat in the Swami's room, crying bitterly, indifferent to appearances. The rest of the party also looked very sad. One of the gentlemen, having introduced himself as the father of the dead boy, narrated the story of how their son, called Vamsi, had met his tragic end in an accident. He told the Swami that since the death of their boy his wife had given up eating and sleeping, weeping day and night. Unable to control himself any longer, the father then burst into tears and with folded hands imploringly said: "Father, we have heard so much about you. We have come to you with great hope in our hearts." Then he pointed to his wife, saying, "Do please save her; I may somehow control my grief and live, but she may not survive this shock. She neither eats nor sleeps; she only cries all day long. Sometimes she becomes desperate and wants to end her life. We cannot pacify her by any means." While the man was telling this sad story the woman was crying piteously, calling the boy by his name.

It was a heart-rending sight. The Swami sat calm and composed for a while without saying anything. He then observed: "What consolation can I offer them in their terrible grief! Now their minds are like red-hot irons. O Lord, You see everything. Please grant their hearts a little peace." Addressing the father of the boy the Swami then said, "I find no words to comfort you: only God can remove your terrible sorrow. He alone who is all kindness, knows why He visits us with such grief."

The Swami was about to speak further when

the mother frantically approached him and clasped his feet. With tears rolling down her cheeks she said: "Father, shall I not see my Vamsi any more? I want to see him just once. Then I shall have no more sorrow. Kindly show him to me once. I want to see where he is, what he is doing, and how he is living." The Swami, of course, tried to explain that it was not possible to do so, since no one can see the dead. He advised her to call earnestly upon the Lord, who alone can bring peace into her heart. He assured her that through His grace not only would she find peace, but her son also would fare better, being lifted to a higher state of existence. But the bereaved mother would not be consoled by any means. She held to the Swami's feet and begged him again and again to bring her son back to her. Visibly moved the Swami sat there quiet for a while, and then as he looked at the picture of Sri Ramakrishna in the room his face became suffused with a divine glow. Filled with great compassion, he turned to the grief-stricken mother and said: "You say you will find peace if you see your son only once. Then I say that through the grace of the Lord you will see him." As the Swami uttered these words the room was filled with a divine presence and there was an awesome silence in the atmosphere. All present felt as if they had heard the voice of God. The Swami's words acted like a charm on the minds of the grief-stricken parents and they felt greatly comforted. After receiving some sweets, previously offered to the Lord in worship, the party departed.

The monks and devotees at Belur seemed to

be quite excited over the unusual incident. Some of them cogitated and argued: Is it ever possible to see the departed? Can the dead really come back? Ordinarily not, but through the grace of the Lord the impossible can become possible and a miracle can happen. About three days later the parents of the deceased boy came to Belur again, but this time they were transformed persons. The mother, who before had been so beside herself with grief, now smilingly went upstairs to pay her respects to the Swami. After saluting him she said: "Father, my sorrow is gone. Through your grace I have seen Vamsi, who is living in great bliss. I have found him sporting with Sri Krishna. Through your grace I have seen not only Vamsi but also the Lord." The Swami, deeply touched, briefly remarked, "Mother, I do not know anything." Then pointing to Sri Ramakrishna's picture he added, "It is the Master who has done it. He is our inmost Self. Victory to the Lord! Victory to the Lord!"

A man of God, established in the highest wisdom, feels at one with the totality of life. He finds his own self in every being, small and great, nay, in the whole universe. That is what accounts for his boundless compassion and love. Besides, as he lives constantly identified with God, who is supreme intelligence and the source of all power, he has access to knowledge and power that know no limit. He becomes in a way omniscient and omnipotent. Nature obeys him like a bond slave, revealing to him all her secrets. Occasionally, he may be impelled to do things which appear extra-

ordinary, contrary to the so-called laws of nature; but they are not unnatural—they are only supernatural. While reviewing the life of Swami Shivananda we sometimes come across incidents which may be termed supernatural or miraculous. The Swami manifested unusual powers, as proved by the above incidents, but he manifested those powers with no intention of making demonstrations to overawe people. He did so because of his sincere desire to help people and to remove their sufferings. As he merged his will in the divine will, he was without ego. Even when he was instrumental in the performance of a miracle, he never felt that he himself was doing anything. He would invariably give the credit to God.

Srijut Mahendra Nath Gupta, better known as M, author of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, left his mortal body on Saturday, June 4, 1932.⁹ He was seventy-eight years old when he died. The news moved Mahapurushji very much and he sat silent for a while. Unable to control his feelings any longer he then gently remarked to those who were close by: "The Master placed me in such a position that I could not even go and see M (when he was sick). One by one the Master is taking away his devotees . . . Ah! M lived in Calcutta, illumining the entire city, as it were. How many devotees visited him and heard from him the Master's words and thus were filled with peace! This loss will never be made good. M had nothing else to discuss but the words of Sri Ramakrishna; his life

⁹ *Shivananda Vani*, II

was filled with the Master. How dearly the Master loved him!

“At one time M spent many days in succession at Dakshineswar. He was very simple as regards his food, living mostly on milk and rice. The Master himself arranged for a pint of good milk that he needed every day. M had a very strong body, that's why he could do so much of the Master's work. Whatever he heard from the Master he would note down in his diary after going home. From those notes he wrote that wonderful *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. He had a prodigious memory. He merely jotted down meagre notes, and from those notes, by exercising his memory through meditation, he compiled the Gospel. He belonged to the group of Sri Ramakrishna's intimate disciples. The Master, as it were, brought M with him for that particular work. M was accustomed to visit the Master every Saturday or Sunday or on any holiday. He also saw him when the Master came to Calcutta or wherever else he might be visiting. On such occasions, interesting subjects were sure to be discussed, with a big crowd present. All of a sudden Sri Ramakrishna would turn to M and ask: 'M, did you understand? Note that point well.' Sometimes the Master would repeat certain points. We did not realize then why he spoke to M in that way.

“The Master's words were so impressive and instructive that I too felt tempted to make notes. One day at Dakshineswar I was listening to him, looking intently at his face. He was explaining many beautiful things. Noticing my keen interest, suddenly the Master said: 'Look here! Why are you listening so attentively?' I was taken by surprise. He then added: 'You don't have to do that. Your life is different.' I felt

as if the Master had divined my intention to keep notes and did not approve of it, and that was why he had spoken in that way. From that time on I gave up the idea of making notes of his conversations, and whatever notes I already had I threw into Ganga."

The next morning some devotees who had associated with and served him devotedly for a long time came to the monastery from Calcutta. They seemed to be grief-stricken over M's passing away. Upon hearing from them the details of M's death, Mahapurushji affectionately said: "Ah! It is a great blow to you. This bereavement is fresh; words will not assuage this grief. . . . What is to be done? No one has any control over this. Sri Ramakrishna himself is taking away his devotees. But we know that the relationship of M with us and with the Master is eternal. Never think for a moment that M passed away for good and that there has been an end of everything."

Talking in this vein, Mahapurushji tried to console the devotees, and while bidding them good-bye said: "What is there to fear, my children? The Master is living (in a spiritual sense! We are still in the flesh. Whenever you find time, come to the monastery."

When the devotees had left, Mahapurushji said, "Ah! M was like a refuge to the devotees—a haven of peace. Particularly after Swami Saradananda's death many devotees used to go to M, and he would gladden their hearts by speaking to them about the Master. This loss cannot be replaced! He was indeed a holy soul. What great work of the Master he accomplished! Even if he had written

only one volume of the Gospel (there are five such volumes in Bengali), it would have immortalized him. His work is imperishable.”

For some months Swami Subodhananda, a direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, had been living at Belur, ailing from tuberculosis.¹⁰ Mahapurushji himself was looking after his treatment and nursing. In spite of all the care, his illness became worse from day to day. Mahapurushji would not accept the fact that Swami Subodhananda's condition was so serious. If someone inquired about his illness, Mahapurushji invariably said: “His condition is not so bad; I think he is slowly improving. We have to stay as long as the Master needs us for his work.” Later, as he got the exact report of the doctor, Mahapurushji became very much concerned. On Friday, December 2, 1932, Swami Subodhananda passed away. For a moment Mahapurushji was shocked to hear the sad news. Controlling his emotions he made inquiries about the details of the Swami's death and then said: “From his very childhood Khoka (the name by which Swami Subodhananda was affectionately called by his brother disciples—it means ‘Child’) was a person of great dispassion and austerity. He was by nature very guileless like a child. . . . At the time he came to Sri Ramakrishna he was just a little boy. The Master was very fond of him, and so was Swamiji.”

After remaining quiet for a while Mahapurushji hummed the song which begins: “I am

¹⁰ *Shivananda Vani*, II

amazed, O playful Mother, at Thy sport. . . .” The Swami put so much feeling into the song that all present were moved. Later he remarked: “This was the song that Trailokya Nath Sanyal had sung at the Cossipore cremation ground after the Mahasamadhi of the Master. It is indeed very difficult to understand the Mother’s play. . . . Didn’t you see how splendidly Khoka left the body and became united with Sri Ramakrishna? When the Master calls we have to go.”

In the afternoon the attendants who had lovingly cared for Swami Subodhananda and nursed him during his illness were conducted to Mahapurushji’s presence. They had not eaten any food since the previous day and seemed to be overwhelmed with grief. Looking at them Mahapurushji’s eyes became filled with tears. Controlling himself he tried to console them, saying: “Well, tell me, where has Swami Subodhananda gone? He is simply gathered in the Master. Have faith in my words. What good will it do only to grieve? It is ignorance that causes grief. Go to the shrine. Meditate and pray, saying, ‘O Lord, give us knowledge, give us devotion.’ He will surely give you strength. If you meditate upon Him, this ignorance and lack of faith will go. Crying will do no good. It is not that I myself don’t feel like crying; I too have cried. I have my knowledge too. The Master is withdrawing his powers to himself. Who can stem this tide? The Master’s disciples are leaving one after another, and I am being put on the rack. I feel as if a rib were being torn loose out of my chest.”

The death of M and then of Swami Subodhanda, one following the other within the short space of six months, were indeed too much for Mahapurushji. Humanly speaking, he seemed to have been deeply moved by their deaths and the deaths previously of his other beloved brothers. It was not that he lacked awareness that man as spirit is immortal; he knew this full well. His was a case of spiritual loneliness. Even a man of God, while functioning in the physical realm, feels the need of companionship — the association of those kindred souls with whom he can compare notes and exchange ideas and experiences. Now that most of his brother disciples were gone, Mahapurushji seemed to be missing their companionship very much. He appeared to be eagerly awaiting his turn to go and be united with the Master and his soul-mates. He would often say, "Almost all are now gone. With whom shall I talk? There is no longer any joy in conversation."

If anyone questioned Mahapurushji as to where he would go after death, he invariably replied that his rightful place would be in the Ramakrishna loka, the spiritual realm where the Master abides with his beloved ones, and wherefrom he still carries on his divine mission and will continue to do so for many, many centuries. This is in perfect accord with the traditional Hindu belief regarding a Divine Incarnation and his work. When God incarnates as man and functions as a world teacher, his is a cosmic mission that lasts for a very long period of time. Even if he seems to disappear from the gross physical plane with the death of his material form, God

Incarnate continues to exist and to work in his spiritual body from his spiritual realm. The great disciples that serve as his instruments during his earthly sojourn also join him after death in his spiritual realm and continue their service for him from there. Unlike most illumined souls, these disciples, somehow, retain their individualities and work for the good of the world — for the peace and happiness of many. Theirs is a unique life of blessedness — theirs is a special privilege of continued exalted service of the Lord, rather than absorption into Brahman. Mahapurushji certainly belonged to this blessed category. As he tirelessly worked for the Master while living in the flesh, we can imagine that he would love to do the same after being released from the body. His future and that of his brother disciples is indissolubly bound up with the Master and his great mission.

While discussing the destiny of householder devotees of Sri Ramakrishna who had given their heart and soul to the Master, Mahapurushji at one time remarked that they would also be taken care of after death. Their salvation is also certain. Out of infinite compassion the Master would either transport them to his blessed realm or otherwise help them on in their march toward the goal of life.

To illustrate this point, the Swami then referred to the case of a low-caste devotee who used to live at Dakshineswar. Though of lowly origin, the man was very very devout and had great love for the Master. The latter was also very gracious to him. Speaking about him the Swami said: “ Haven’t you heard about Rasik, who used to do

the work of a scavenger at Dakshineswar? He used to call the Master 'Father.' One day as the Master was returning, in an ecstatic state, to his room from the Panchavati, Rasik knelt down before him and with folded hands asked: 'Father, will you not be gracious to me? Shall I not have your grace?' To him the Master replied: 'Have no fear, you will obtain it; you will see me at the time of your death.' It actually happened as he had promised; the Master appeared before the man. Before his death he was placed in a tulasi (sacred basil) grove and he breathed his last in an exalted mood, saying: 'Here comes Father; Father is here!'"¹¹ Mahapurushji assured all that the Master had taken care of Rasik, this scavenger devotee, after his death.

On another occasion the Swami recounted certain incidents¹² connected with the remarkable death of Balaram Bose, a great householder devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. He said: "Balaram Babu had a phenomenal death. He had been seriously ill for some time, and we were all anxious as to what would happen. Two or three days before his death he forbade any of his relatives to come near him; he was willing to see only the Swamis Brahmananda, Premananda and a few of us. We were the persons who were to be by his side. The few words he spoke were only of Sri Ramakrishna. A day previous to his final departure the doctor gave up all hope for his recovery. In sadness Balaram Babu's wife was seated with Golap Ma, Yogin Ma (two lady-devotees of the Master) and some others in the inner

^{11,12} *Mahapurush Shivananda*

apartment. All of a sudden she saw a dark cloud fleeting across the sky. Gradually as this cloud became thicker and approached nearer, she discovered a celestial chariot nestled in its centre. Finally, as the chariot rested upon the roof of their house, she saw the Master stepping from it and walking into the room where Balaram had been lying sick. After a while she saw the Master returning to his seat in the car, holding Balaram by the hand whereupon the vehicle arose and disappeared into the sky. At that very moment Balaram breathed his last.

“Miracles of this nature do happen! Even now we hear about the extraordinary deaths of some devotees. Such persons have superconscious visions and experiences at the moment of their death. They pass on repeating the name of the Master and are united with him in his divine realm. His devotees are bound to do well and to reach higher planes of consciousness after death.”

Two or three days after the conversation just cited the saintly wife of Navagopal Ghose, a householder devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, passed away. Hers also was an extraordinary death. She departed from the body in an attitude of great devotion and meditation. Mahapurushji sat silent for a while as he heard the news, and then remarked: “She and others like her form a class by themselves. They are born from time to time with the Lord and play their chosen roles in the divine drama.”

The Swami then told certain incidents¹³ regarding Navagopal's wife, extolling her love and devotion. He said: “One day the Holy Mother,

¹³ *Shivananda Vani*, II

during her sojourn in Vrindavan, while attending the vespers in the Radhakanta temple, saw Navagopal's wife, lovingly fanning the Deity on the altar (although the lady was not physically present there). The Holy Mother mentioned this mystic experience to the women devotees who were with her at the time. Ah! What love and devotion Navagopal's wife had for the Master! Hers was the attitude of the Gopis of old. Once her sons complained: 'Mother, you swear by the name of Sri Ramakrishna! See what a sad plight he has placed us in. We have had enough of this devotion. Don't take his name any more!' (The family was passing through certain difficulties at the time). To this Navagopal's wife replied: 'What are you saying! I have loved him. I have given him my heart once and for all. What nonsense do you speak!' Mahapurushji repeated this remark of hers and then said: "She was his bond slave. She sold herself to him without expecting any recompense! Ah! As I think about her love and devotion for the Master, my heart throbs with an unusual sensation. Self-love is kama (lust); the love of the Lord is prema (genuine devotion). Navagopal's wife once remarked to a friend: 'Do your spiritual practice, but what counts most is death in the right manner.' She in any case had the right kind of death. After her death she was united with the Master. She passed on marvellously, clasping the Master's picture to her heart and repeating his name."

It has been mentioned that the closing years of Mahapurushji's life were marked by unusual spiritual upheaval, literally filled with visions and reali-

zations. We shall try now to give a glimpse of those experiences.¹⁴ The entire time, whether by night or by day, the Swami seemed to be in deep spiritual states, his presence radiating unusual purity, peace and power. Everyone meeting him felt it and attested to it. During the day time he would, as usual, receive in his room a large number of visitors, devotees and monks, with whom he talked of God and spirituality, helping them according to their individual needs. Sometimes in a certain mood, he would describe to them some profound spiritual experience of his or of the Master, the true significance of which, however, could not be understood by most of those present. At night when there were very few around, he was wont to be in his most exalted state. Beaming with joy he then hummed some devotional song or chanted verses from the scriptures. Or perhaps he would remain silent, indrawn and abstracted, having no awareness of the outer world.

Because of an excess of spiritual emotions and ecstasy the Swami lay awake many nights, paying no attention to his body. One morning to the attendant standing near he said: "Let me sleep a little now. Last night I didn't sleep at all. Swami Adbhutananda never slept at night. He spent the entire night in meditation and spiritual practice. Let me now make amends for the night's loss of sleep. It does not bother me any more; I have settled it. 'I keep awake in meditation and communion.' " After saying this the Swami sang the following song of Ramprasad:

¹⁴ *Shivananda Vani*, II

“ Now I have hit upon a splendid idea;
I have learnt it from a man—a holy man.
Mother, I have found a strange philosopher,
Who hails from a land that knows no night.
Night or day, I am awake — wide awake.
I care not for forms or rituals; they’re useless,
A sheer waste of time. I am at peace,
Giving sleep back to Her to whom it belongs.
I keep awake in meditation and communion.
I have for ever lullabyed sleep to sleep.”

If anyone questioned him about his health, the Swami always smiled and said: “ Ah! Who can kill one whom the Lord protects! So long as the Master wants me here for his work, this body will, somehow or other, live.” If the attendant argued, saying that insomnia might prove disastrous to his health, he replied: “ Yogis do not need so much sleep. When the mind is absorbed in samadhi, it can do without sleep. Furthermore, there is a state of meditation which, if attained, takes away all tiredness and fatigue from the body. In that state one feels quite replenished and strong in body, even as one would after deep sound sleep, an unspeakable blessedness filling the body and mind. Whenever I feel tired and physically weak, I lift my consciousness from the body and remain rapt in meditation. Then everything seems to be all right; I enjoy peace and joy.” After this the Swami spoke about the Master — how seldom he was apt to sleep at night in Dakshineswar.

In those days, for a period of several weeks, the Swami manifested a spiritual state which caused him to act in a strange manner. While receiving people, no matter whether they were young or old,

lay or monastic, he would first salute them with folded hands and then inquire about their health and welfare. It became something like a ritual with him. In India the etiquette is that equals in age and relationship, while greeting, salute each other, whereas seniors bless in return for salutations by juniors. In the case of Mahapurushji, as he was the venerable head of the Order, his saluting people seemed unthinkable; yet he constantly greeted all by saluting them. Besides, it was noticed that the Swami never let anyone leave his room without offering him something to eat. He was specially kind to children when they came to see him. He treated them with lots of sweets and fruits.

Regarding this state of Mahapurushji writes a monk:¹⁵

“It was past midnight. The whole world seemed to be wrapped in stillness. A dim green light was burning in the Swami’s room. The Swami was awake, seated cross-legged on his bed. He was quite sick. His sickness demanded constant vigilance and care. Two monks had to wait upon him and attend by turns to his needs. At about two in the morning, as an attendant came to his bedside, he solemnly asked, ‘Who is it?’ When the monk gave his name, the Swami saluted him with folded hands. The monk, a disciple, naturally felt embarrassed and hurt at the Swami’s act, and with tears in his eyes said: ‘Maharaj, I am your servant. Why did you salute me? It will do me great harm.’ The Swami calmly replied: ‘Don’t be upset, my child, it won’t do you any harm, I am telling you; believe my words. I understand your embarrass-

¹⁵ *Shivananda Vani*, II

ment and hurt feeling. What can I do? I feel the living presence of God in you and salute the Lord who is in you. You may think differently. How can I explain these things to you? In how many different ways the Master is blessing me, and how many things he is revealing to me!' After saying this he fell silent."

On another occasion, being questioned about this strange act just related, the Swami explained:

"Whenever people come to my presence I see various Gods and Goddesses, and I salute them. The radiant forms of the Deity, peculiar to the inner nature and being of the visitors, appear to me. The visiting persons become vague, like shadows, and the divine forms become distinct and living. That is why I salute. After my salutations the divine forms disappear and I see the people and recognize them clearly."¹⁶

Again he said:

"Do I do those things? I myself often don't understand why I act that way. I am surprised at myself. How can others understand? There is none else except the Lord within this body. I act and speak the way He makes me do. How does the Lord sport in this body! To whom shall I tell these things, and who will understand me? You are all youngsters — inexperienced. Were the Swamis Brahmananda, Turiyananda and Saradananda living today, they would understand me. It would give me great satisfaction to talk to them about these most cherished experiences. His will be done! He can sacrifice His goat either at the neck or at the tail. Now with the passing of days, as the activities of the body are decreasing, inner activities are increasing. Only He knows how long this body will continue to live this way."¹⁷

^{16,17} *Shivananda Vani*, II

Another night the attendant who cared for him found the Swami seated on his cot with closed eyes, deep in meditation. It was past midnight, about 2-00 o'clock. The monastery grounds seemed to be enfolded in a mantle of great stillness, which the Swami's meditative presence deepened. Shortly afterwards the Swami opened his eyes and slowly recited the 70th and 71st verses from the second chapter of the Gita. Addressing the attendant who was listening attentively, he then asked: "Do you know what they mean?"

As the attendant remained silent the Swami began to explain:

"As the waters of many streams and rivers flow into the ocean — always full and profound, without causing any commotion; in the same way, desires because of prarabdha karma (karma which has begun to bear fruit) may enter into the heart of a knower, ever full and established in the bliss of Brahman, without in any way disturbing his serenity. He always remains self-sufficient and self-contained, enjoying freedom and peace of the highest order. Quite different is the case of a wordly man fettered with many cravings; he does not know happiness at all. A man who moves in the world, devoid of craving, attachment and ego, alone attains true peace.

"It is impossible to obtain peace that is abiding so long as one is subject to desires, and one cannot wholly uproot desires without divine grace. The Lord has been gracious enough to efface from my mind all my desires; I have none. This body of mine continues to live only through His will and for His work, I am by nature pure, illumined and free. Sometimes I am not at all aware that I have a body. Of course, He is

having a lot of His work done by this body. That is why He still preserves this body. I certainly have no desire, do you understand? I am Brahman, ever blissful.”¹⁸

Saying this he became silent and sat pensive for some time. The Swami's appearance seemed to have changed at the time; he appeared to be a new person altogether. His presence was so awe-inspiring that the attendant dared not look at him or interrupt him. Absorbed in his own thought the Swami then said: “The Mother has graciously granted me everything; she has verily poured out Her spiritual treasures upon me and made me full. I have nothing to ask for. Through Her grace I have attained all. Only She knows why she has kept this body yet.”¹⁹

It was the dead of night. Mahapurushji was still seated on his cot, deeply absorbed in meditation. After a while he opened his eyes, then closed them again, and this continued intermittently. All of a sudden the silence of the room was broken by the mewling of a cat. The Swami turned his gaze in the direction from which the mewling came and saluted the cat reverently with folded hands. As the attendant did not understand what the Swami was doing and why, he looked puzzled.

The Swami then explained:

“Look here, the Lord has placed me in such a state that I find everything pervaded by one consciousness. It is this one universal intelligence that is sporting in and through the house, bed, furniture as well as all living beings. Basically, all are one consciousness; it is only name

that accounts for differences. I see it quite clearly. In spite of all efforts I have not succeeded in controlling this feeling of mine. All indeed are intelligent. This intelligence is radiantly present in the cat too. The Lord has filled my cup to the brim with this idea during these days. People come and go. I talk with them because I have to. I carry on various physiological acts like eating and so on, as a matter of habit. But the moment I withdraw my mind from these things I find everywhere the play of this one consciousness. Names and forms belong to a lower order of existence. Whenever I transcend names and forms it is all quiet — all conscious and blissful. These things cannot be explained by discussion. Only he knows who has reached this state."²⁰

The attendant admiringly listened to this recital and seemed to be transported for the time being to a different realm — a realm far above this humdrum world of everyday existence. The inner life of a man of God is always too deep for expression. It is something that cannot be measured by the foot-rule of common sense and logic. It is incomprehensible and incommunicable, and will ever remain so. The outer world knows very little of it. The experiences and realizations with which we close this chapter can therefore furnish only a glimpse and a vague picture of the real man that was Mahapurush, Swami Shivananda.

We live in an age which is pre-eminently scientific. Science studies phenomena by observation and experiment, and hence looks askance at anything that has any trace of supernaturalism or mysticism. Science in the past decried religion

²⁰ *Shivananda Vani*, II

and relegated visions and realizations to the junk pile of superstition, hocus-pocus or magic. Science in modern times dubs visions and realizations, hallucinations or psychic phenomena, as fit subjects to be studied by abnormal psychology.

So we do not know how our readers with a scientific, sceptical bias will take the experiences of the Swami and of devotees mentioned here. We can only state that facts are facts. We repeat with Shakespeare: "There are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." The abnormal and the supranormal may look alike, but they are worlds apart. Why not judge a tree by the fruits it bears?

CHAPTER XIII

THE END

As we close our book on the life and work of Swami Shivananda, we are reminded of the fabled mystic career of the river Ganges, the Mother Ganga. Having her origin in the Himalayas, the Ganga winds her tortuous path through the plains of India, bringing fertility, prosperity and culture, giving birth to holy places and large cities teeming with inhabitants. The river Ganga has always been closely bound up with the Hindu race and its spiritual civilization. She evokes in the national consciousness associations most sacred and uplifting. The literatures of India are full of myths and legends depicting her divine origin and purifying influence. She is more than an earthly river; she symbolizes certain spiritual concepts and ideals. She is Mother Divine. She is fluid purity, detachment, compassion and forgiveness. She is ever ready to receive into her bosom men with all their faults and sins. She cleanses the bodies, minds and souls of men, without being herself in any way contaminated. She brings enlightenment and peace to all. Even the breeze that carries the spray of her waters enlivens and purifies. Mightily and mysteriously Mother Ganga speeds forth on her course, doing her work of help and service, unconcerned, and unaware that she does anything. She becomes wider and more magnifi-

cent as she nears the ocean, and finally when she reaches her destination, she seems to exceed all limits. Near the mouth one cannot demarcate where the river ends and the ocean begins; it is boundless and fathomless water, it is water everywhere.

This is typical of a man of God, an illumined teacher of the stature of Mahapurushji and of his work. The Swami by shining forth in the full brilliancy of his spiritual sovereignty seemed to have transcended the limitations of flesh and matter. This was specially evident during the closing years of his life. In his dealings with people he expressed such purity, detachment, compassion and peace! It would be no exaggeration if we were to say that his life at that time was literally divine. Regarding this marvellous mental state of the Swami, a devotee writes: "As his life drew to a close, it seemed that his existence and personality became entirely dissociated from ordinary existence; detachment, as in the case of Buddha, was clearly manifest in him. He did not seem to be an earthly being at all."¹

It would, however, be a great mistake for one to think that the Swami's detachment was similar to the cold indifference of an ego-centric hermit, who is sick of the world and eager to run away from it. It was the fruit of his realization of the unreality of phenomena. As the world of name and form appeared transient like a shadow, he found it difficult to become attached to anything. He was

¹ *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

like a child, above the gunas, with no passion or prejudice. He mentioned many a time that he had no desire or wish unfulfilled. Naturally, his sense of values was quite different from that of an average man swayed by earthly desires. There were, of course, times when he would be impelled by great compassion to help and serve others. That was because he felt the living presence of God in all—of Him, the Indwelling Spirit and Lord of the Universe, moving and functioning in different forms and guises.

It has been shown how the Swami, as head of the Order, discharged the duties of his office to the best of his ability, and he did this until he was about to depart from this world. The monastery at Belur and everything connected with it were very dear and sacred to him. It is the place that enshrines the holy relics of Sri Ramakrishna and of his disciples. It is the veritable house of God, where is radiantly present the spirit of the Master—the Divine Incarnation—whose ideas will, in course of time, sweep throughout humanity. It is the centre from which will radiate spiritual forces bringing about revolutionary changes and establishing peace all over the world. The Swami felt it very deeply and often told the monks and devotees about it.

It had always been the Swami's daily custom to go around the monastery grounds, visit the monks working and attending to their respective duties, and see for himself how things went on. But during the later part of his life, as it had become impossible for him to do so himself, because of physical incapacity, he had commissioned an

attendant to do it for him. Every afternoon this monk spent an hour or more visiting the sick, inspecting the cattle and garden and observing everything which went on in different parts. He would then come and report to the Swami who, of course, showed keen interest. Sometimes the Swami asked scrutinizing questions in order to get a complete picture of the monastery in its working order. One day as the monk dropped in, ready to give his report, he found the Swami seated quietly, his face grave and eyes half-closed. He was so indrawn that he hardly noticed the monk standing near him. Later when he opened his eyes and looked around, the monk began giving his report. After listening for a minute, the Swami gently interrupted him, saying: "You see, this world has no reality for me: Brahman alone exists. It is to keep my mind on a lower plane that I speak and ask for bits of information."² Saying this, he became silent and drifted again into his usual contemplative mood.

With the passing of days, the Swami's body grew more and more feeble with all sorts of ailments. By strict orders of the doctor he had to conserve his energy, avoiding unnecessary strain, until at last he was confined to his own room. He could not any more go to the shrine to which he had so faithfully repaired every day to attend worship and meditation. He missed it very much, but religiously he continued his devotions and meditations in his own quarters. Of this little room, where he slept, sat, moved and talked with people he made a holy

² *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

shrine. Anywhere, at anytime he seemed to be spiritually attuned.

One might notice that long before the break of day the Swami was repeatedly asking if the worshipper and his assistant were on their way to the shrine. When finally their footsteps were heard and he was told that they were about to open the shrine, he was overjoyed. When the sound of music connected with the worship reached his ears it threw him into an ecstasy, and he would exclaim repeatedly, "Hail to the guru! Glory be unto the Lord!" The Swami had always been very fond of music as an important aid to spiritual practice. During his regime the monastery at Belur used to engage in singing once or twice daily. The monks got together in the large visitors' room and sang bhajan (devotional songs) to the accompaniment of various musical instruments. The Swami, seated in his room upstairs, listened to them with great devotion; he enjoyed them very much. Sometimes, if he happened to be in the mood, he himself might sing a particular song to the delight of those who were in his room. Sometimes he sent a request downstairs for a special number which he wished to have sung. Bhajan moved him profoundly.

In those days, visitors coming to visit the Swami and seeking help were numberless, and they were there at almost every hour of the day, excepting the times when he was taking his meals or was resting. Tirelessly and inspiringly he talked to them. Time slipped by unnoticed, but as the twilight hour glided into the mystic dusk, he became

more and more indrawn. Finally when he heard the ringing of bells and the chants connected with vespers in the shrine, all talk and work would stop. Ecstatically he clapped his hands and repeated the name of the Lord, or perhaps fell into one of his deepest meditative moods. "Seeing him and hearing him, everyone knew that his consciousness was indeed deeply attached to and absorbed in something—someone—very dear to him, beyond this world, and that he was experiencing profound sweetness day and night in the company of his beloved Lord."³ All those present invariably found their thoughts composed and experienced a tranquillity born of meditation.

Out of the numberless people who came to the Swami at Belur, there were those who sought initiation. If humanly possible he never refused initiation to anyone; for he felt that it was the Master himself who drew people to him. He was only too happy to help them. Earlier he used to initiate people in the shrine, but later, as he did not have the strength to walk there he initiated them in his own room. His initiation was no mere formal affair; it was the quickening of the latent spiritual impulse in an aspirant and the directing of him along the path which accorded with his psychological and spiritual needs.

One evening when certain monks and devotees wanted to learn about initiation, the Swami explained: "Initiation is of various kinds. Everyone doesn't have to repeat the mantra (mystic word

³ *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

or syllable). All do not have the same approach; there is difference in temperaments. Ordinary teachers may not understand all these things. Some prefer to think of God as having form, others as the Formless. One likes to meditate; let him do so; another prefers to tell his beads; that is his way. There are others who have to combine meditation and repetition of the name of the Lord or some such mystic formula. Spiritual progress will be very slow if you instruct everyone in the same way, casting all in the same mould.”⁴

The Swami had such deep love and solicitation for those whom he accepted as disciples. Not only did he think about their spiritual well-being and pray to God for their spiritual progress and development; he also showed great concern for their physical and mundane existence. He would spend hours in meditation, not for himself but for his disciples. He, being a knower of Brahman, had attained the consummation of human destiny, and as such did not have to meditate for himself. Every action of his overflowed with his ennobling, uplifting love, and it showed itself in scores of ways, small and large. “Towards the end of his life he annihilated time and space, as it were, in his expression of love for his spiritual dependants.”⁵ One day when some disciples had expressed great worry about his failing health, he smiled and said, “Why are you afraid? None of you need fear. I have arranged all for you; you will never lack anything. Your troubles are over.”⁶ Dhan Gopal Mukerji, one of

⁴ *Shivananda Vani*, II

⁵ *The Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna*

⁶ *Shivananda Vani*, II

his disciples, who had been abroad for many years, came to Belur to see the Swami and at the sight of his broken condition burst into tears. The Swami consoled him, saying: "When Buddha was about to attain pari-nirvana, final release from the body, Ananda was overwhelmed with grief. At this Buddha observed, 'Why are you weeping, Ananda? This life lasts for fifty, sixty or at the most a hundred years. I am about to attain Eternal Life.'"⁷

To a superficial observer the conduct of a man of God may sometimes appear strange. This is but natural; a man of God is so extraordinary in so many ways. In order to understand him properly one must rise to his stature and judge his actions from his standpoint. It was noticed that the Swami, during the daytime, left his bed strewn with all sorts of things, the assortment consisting of a stick, a stringed instrument, the Gita, the Upanishads, some folk-tales, and perhaps a book profusely illustrated. Sometimes he took the stick and playfully shook it at the attendant; or he might finger the stringed instrument, humming a favourite melody while playing it. At other times he used to amuse himself by glancing through the pages of the folk-tales or the illustrated book. Again, he would pick up some sacred texts and become absorbed in reading them. The callers wondered why the Swami had his bed cluttered with all those things and acted as he did. One day he explained: "My mind longs all the time to rush towards the Absolute. That is why I am trying all these trifling diversions so as to hold my mind down. Just

⁷ *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

as the mother gives toys to her child to keep him busy, so I am also trying various means to make my mind forget the Absolute.”⁸

The state of the Swami’s mind at this time can best be described in his own words: “The more the mind is withdrawn from the world, the more it advances in the realm of the Spirit. Sri Rama-krishna is graciously revealing to me the Reality beyond body, mind and intellect. . . . He is giving me the realizations mentioned in the scriptures. I am not the body; I am the eternal Supreme Being—ever pure, perfect and free. The Master has granted me knowledge of this in the fullest measure. That is why it makes no difference whether the body is well, sick or old. The body will certainly follow its own course.”⁹

Ill or well, the Swami was always alert, keeping himself informed about the dates of different religious events or festivals. Various occasions would evoke varying spiritual emotions in him. The monastery at Belur, in addition to its usual schedule of activity, observed many festivals and anniversaries with special worship, feasting, singing or lectures. But in those days, because of the Swami’s sickness and weakened physical condition, the festivities had to be curtailed lest they should aggravate his state. The Swami always protested against this, insisting that everything should go on as usual in spite of his physical condition. As an example, when on the day following a celebration of Swami Vivekananda’s birthday, someone asked whether the crowds, the medley of many voices and the

⁸ *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

⁹ *Shivananda Vani*, I

accompanying excitement had not caused him suffering, he replied, "Remember, that was Swamiji's birthday, a day of supreme joy!" As he uttered these words, his whole soul seemed to be given over to the thought of the gladness and glory of the many devotees who had congregated in the name of the Lord to be blessed.

During this period the Swami practically lived in another world having all kinds of spiritual visions and experiences. In particular he was wont to see his beloved Master and brother disciples who had passed away. On one occasion he exclaimed: "Oh! In what joy do I pass these nights! I see Maharaj, Hari Maharaj and others in vision. My mind seems to be filled with bliss as soon as it grows dark."¹⁰ Again, on another occasion he observed: "The other night I was in deep meditation, absorbed in samadhi. As I was meditating, my mind soared higher and higher, leaving behind this gross material world with its body consciousness, until it reached the far off spiritual realm wherein dwell the seven perfected sages. There I saw Swamiji. A thin, effulgent border, like a string, seemed to demarcate this realm from the world of phenomena. Swamiji had crossed this boundary and come down; that was when he was born (to help Sri Ramakrishna in his divine mission). I also saw Maharaj there. I was in such supernal bliss!"¹¹ Another evening, shortly before vespers, the Swami was seated on his bed facing the shrine—calm, serene and indrawn. All of a sudden he broke the silence by demanding of his attendant:

“ Give me some ashes of Vishwanath (meaning the Lord of the Universe—an appellation of the Shiva of Benares) and spread a silken scarf on the cot. Ah! Shiva is here! Here comes the Master! ” ¹² After saying this he fell silent, lost in deep spiritual communion. In that condition he remained for a long time.

At the beginning of the year 1933, the Swami's illness took a serious turn. In addition to the infirmities of age and asthmatic spells, he developed high blood pressure and also a heart condition, till at last he became bedridden. All became alarmed, and the best physicians were sent for. Several attendants had to wait upon him night and day by turns. Mentally he was always cheerful, but he regretted very much that he was causing others so much trouble. His diet at the time consisted of a little rice, vegetable soup and milk, or perhaps a little fruit. Later he had to give up solid food altogether, subsisting upon liquids alone. He ate simply to keep body and soul together, so that he could think of the Lord and serve His children.

We have noted that the Swami hardly slept at night; sleep seemed to have vanished from his eyes. After lying for a while trying to sleep, he would sit up and ask the attendant to read to him certain passages from the Srimad Bhagavatam or the Upanishads. Or perhaps he would request that he repeat a certain holy name of God or a particular mantra. Again, he might ask to hear some passages from Kalidasa's " Cloud Messenger ; " this plunged him into raptures. Everything in this universe

¹²-*Mahapurush Shivananda*

appeared to him as a sport or projection of maya, the cosmic juggler. He saw and felt vividly the presence of the Real, in and through the changing and the changeable.

In March, 1933, a Saturday, the day before the public celebration of Sri Ramakrishna's birthday anniversary, the Swami expressed the wish to be taken downstairs and around the monastery grounds, so that he might see with his own eyes the elaborate preparations for the great function. Seated on a lounging chair he was carried to the temporary kitchens, where huge quantities of rice, curries, lentils and sweets were in the process of being cooked in order to be served the following day. The Swami observed everything with keen interest while asking questions. Then he was taken to the grounds where canopies were pitched to protect from the sun and rain the many thousands who were to be fed. The joy and bustle of the monks and devotees, busy in making preparations for the festivities, made the Swami very happy and he talked with them as he was carried along.

A month or two later he again expressed the desire to be brought downstairs and carried about, in order to visit the different parts of the monastery. There was a regular procession of monks and devotees following the Swami's lounging chair. He stopped in front of each temple and with folded hands offered salutations. He turned his eyes and looked at the river Ganga, bowing in reverence. He visited the cowshed, the garden, the clinic, the store and all, making enquiries as he went along. He seemed to be in a playful mood, curious, keen and joyous.

On the 25th of April of that year, in the morning, he initiated three earnest devotees and blessed them by dedicating them at the feet of the Lord. He seemed, that day, to be in a better physical condition, although he showed signs of strain. Shortly after eleven in the forenoon, as usual, he was given his simple food—boiled rice and vegetable soup. He was about to finish his meal by drinking a cup of whey, when suddenly the right side of his body became paralyzed. As his hand that held the cup was trembling, he replaced the cup on the saucer. Very soon afterwards his speech became impaired. He cast a meaningful glance at the attendant and tried in vain to express what he wanted to say. He sat there still, his face wreathed in a beautiful smile and his eyes expressing some deep inner thought and peacefulness. At last a monk, realizing the gravity of the Swami's condition, felt his pulse and made him lie down on his bed. At once word was sent to Calcutta for expert medical help, and several doctors hurried to the monastery.

The last words spoken by Mahapurush were most memorable. They were: "Whatever is true will happen. Truth alone triumphs in the end. Truth alone persists. That which is false does not exist. Therefore one should not regret it."¹³ The shocking news of his stroke spread fast and brought to the monastery at Belur hundreds of monks and devotees who had always adored the Swami. For months the monastery grounds were crowded with people, eagerly and anxiously waiting for the latest

¹³ *The Voice of India*, May, 1946

news from doctors and attendants regarding the Swami's condition. Although deprived of the use of his limbs and speech, he was fully conscious and alert, keeping track of everything which went on and responding graciously to greetings and messages. With his native smile he welcomed all and expressed his usual desire to help. His kindly look, the gentle movement of his left hand in blessing, and above all his divine presence, lifted the drooping spirit of many a weary person. No stone was left unturned to provide the best medical care, and several doctors were in constant attendance. There were signs that he might to some extent recover the faculty of speech and slowly get well, but these were just the last flare-up of a flame that was soon to be extinguished.

Within a few days after the stroke, Swami Akhandananda, a brother disciple who was destined to succeed Mahapurush as head of the Order, hurried to Belur from his ashrama in Sargachhi. Upon his arrival, full of concern and apprehension, he went straight to Mahapurushji's room. It was still early morning. After tidying the room and bed covers, the attendant was helping Mahapurush to wash his face when the visiting Swami entered. The exchange of greetings between the two brothers was quite touching. Each was happy to see the other. As was his custom, Swami Akhandananda lovingly addressed Mahapurush as "Dada" meaning "Big brother", an appellation used in Bengal by a younger brother to an elder. Fully conscious and alert, Mahapurush at once reacted to the greeting and, with evident signs of joy in his

eyes, tried hard to say something. Baffled in the effort, he seemed overwhelmed with some inner emotion. Akhandanandaji sat for an hour by his bedside chanting such Vedic hymns as Purusha Sukta and Devi Sukta, also recalling reminiscences of the olden days. This worked like magic, and Mahapurush again became calm and composed. The visitor stayed at Belur for several days, and every day without fail he took his place by the bedside of his sick big brother, either reciting sacred texts or engaging in pleasant talk. After a time he departed.

Four or five months later, Swami Vijnanananda, another dear brother, came from Allahabad. It was a surprise visit, prompted by an inner impulse. He remained at the math for only three days and then bade Mahapurush good-bye. As he was about to leave, something very significant happened: Mahapurush placed his hand upon Vijnananandaji's head. Besides being a gesture of endearment, the act had a mystical meaning, which was thus attested by the visiting Swami: "That day when Mahapurush laid his hand on my head, the touch changed my mental attitude. He passed on to me his guiding principle (which had been so dominant in Mahapurushji's life) of helping people spiritually without stint and of assuming responsibility for them. I now feel that as long as I live and have the least strength in my body I shall do the same and give His name to all."¹⁴ Swami Vijnanananda had lived all these years rather a quiet and retiring life, avoiding

¹⁴ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

crowds, talking occasionally to select individuals on spiritual matters. After this incident he began to mingle more freely with people and to give initiation to seekers, refusing none.

For two or three months continuously, ever since the stroke, although lying crippled and helpless in bed, Mahapurush had expressed by signs his wish that the usual daily routine be kept. For example, at about three in the morning the doors and windows of his room had to be opened, so that from his bed he could see the shrine and salute the Lord. Incense had to be lighted and he would gaze intently at the various holy pictures in his room, expressing worshipful reverence to the deities represented by them. Then perhaps he might inquire about the early dawn service at the shrine and the various bhajans sung at the time. Later, as the sun rose and shed its light, causing signs of stir and activity everywhere, the Swami reminded the attendant to throw the usual quantity of grain on the adjoining terrace for the feathered guests—the sparrows, the bulbuls and the mynahs. The pet dogs of the monastery had also to be served their food at this hour. And so it continued throughout the day and the greater part of the night, one ceaseless ritual and worship of the Lord in all these ways.

At this time, when the Swami was bedridden and largely incapacitated, many visitors came to have his darshan and went away blessed. One day there happened to be at Belur Pandit Pramathanath Tarkabhushan, a great Sanskrit scholar, well known for his erudition in the Hindu scriptures.

On learning of Mahapurushji's illness, he expressed the wish to see him and was conducted to his presence. Like a statue he stood in mute admiration and awe by the Swami's bedside, looking at his serene prostrate figure, while tears streamed down his cheeks. Later he remarked feelingly: "I have read in books about jivanmuktas or illumined souls; today face to face I have seen one in the flesh. The Swami seemed to be in deep samadhi all the time, once in a while coming down to the normal plane. I am indeed very much blessed in meeting this supreme yogi. I have studied about samadhi in the scriptures, have thought about it and discussed it a great deal. But never before have I had the good fortune to see a man established in samadhi."¹⁵

In the middle of February, nine months after the stroke, the Swami developed pneumonia. Four days passed amid anxiety, and then it became evident that the tragic end was near. The festivities of the annual birthday celebration of Sri Ramakrishna which fell at this time had been marred by the Swami's illness. Somehow the celebration was now over, but the monks and devotees had not had the heart to enjoy it. At last, on Tuesday, the 20th of February, 1934, Mahapurushji passed into mahasamadhi and was united with Sri Ramakrishna, his beloved Lord and Master. The Holy River, as it were, entered the sea and became one with the Ocean that is boundless and fathomless.

During the hour of his passing the monks and

¹⁵ *Mahapurush Shivananda*

devotees gathered around his bed reciting holy texts. One repeated from Shankara's "Six Stanzas on Liberation;" "I am not the mind, intellect, thought or ego. I am the Soul of Knowledge and Bliss. I am Shiva—I am Shiva." Another recited lines from Pushpadanta's "Hymn on the Greatness of Shiva." Some read verses from the Upanishads and the Gita. Men and women visitors, strangers and all who had flocked to the Belur Math to have a last look at the Great Soul, joined with the monks and devotees, repeating solemnly: "Glory be unto Sri Ramakrishna! Om Sri Ramakrishna!"

According to the traditional Hindu custom, Mahapurushji's mortal remains were bathed in the waters of the Ganga, decorated with flowers and sandalwood paste, and then consigned to the flames on the funeral pyre, after which only the ashes remained. This was the passing of a truly holy man, the closing of a transcendent life dedicated to God and to the service of God in man. His loss is irreparable to the Order and to the many disciples and devotees to whom he brought peace and comfort, but he left behind the eternal remembrance of his sacred life and his flaming testimony to God.

GLOSSARY

A MAN OF GOD

Advaita: The non-dualistic aspect of Vedanta philosophy, expounding the absolute oneness of God and the soul.

Agrahayana: The eighth month of the Bengali calendar, approximately mid-November to mid-December.

Akhanda Satchidananda: The Undivided, Infinite Brahman or Reality as 'Existence-Knowledge-Bliss' Absolute.

Ashrama: (1) A monastery; also a religious retreat.

(2) Any one of the four stages into which man's life is divided according to Vedic teachings: celibate student life; married householder life; the life of retirement and contemplation; and monastic life.

Atman: The aspect of Divinity or Godhead immanent in the individual being. Also called Self, Spirit, or Soul.

Babu: A term used to signify courteous regard, somewhat similar to 'Mister' or 'Esquire'.

Bhajan: Religious music or worship of God with singing.

Bhakti: Love for or devotion to God.

Bodhi Tree: The sacred fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*) at Bodh Gaya, seated under which Buddha attained Nirvana.

Brahmachari: (1) A spiritual aspirant who has renounced worldly pursuits and joined a monastery.

(2) The celibate student stage, the first of the four stages into which the life of an individual is divided according to Vedic teachings. See Ashrama.

Brahman: According to Vedanta, Brahman is the Supreme transcendental Reality or Godhead, impersonal, absolute, and blissful.

Brahmin: One belonging to the first of the four Hindu castes, whose duties include spiritual practice, religious ministry, and austere habits.

Brahmo Samaj: A monotheistic religious and social reform movement of the 19th Century in Bengal, India. Founded by Raja Ram-Mohan Roy, it encouraged liberal views and a modern outlook and its membership was open to all classes of persons.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: Brihadaranyaka, which means 'the great book of the forest', is the largest and one of the most important of the Upanishads. (*q.v.*)

Chandi: Primarily it is one of the Names of the Divine Mother. But it is widely used as the title of a sacred book of seven hundred verses singing the praises and glories of Durga (*q.v.*)

- Chaturmasya*: A 'four-month period' (approximately June-September) of the rainy season, during which Indian monks stop travelling and stay in one suitable place.
- Chhandogya Upanishad*: One of the major and important Upanishads (*q.v.*)
- Chhatra*: A charitable establishment where food is cooked and distributed free to monks.
- Daridra Narayana*: God in the poor and the destitute.
- Darshan*: (1) Seeing or experiencing the spiritual presence of God or of a holy person. Popularly, it also means 'having a divine vision' of a deity.
(2) Philosophy. There are six systems of Indian philosophy.
- Dasha-Mahavidya*: The ten divine manifestations of the Mother of the Universe—such as Kali, Tara, Bhairavi, Kamala, etc.
- Desha*: Space or place.
- Devaki*: Mother of Sri Krishna.
- Devi Sukta*: A hymn of the Rig-Veda (*q.v.*) (X. 125) in honour of the Divine Mother.
- Dharma*: Literally, 'that which upholds one's true nature'. More commonly, it means righteous conduct, right action, religious duty, or moral injunctions and prohibitions.
- Dhuni*: An open fire, with logs of wood, like a camp-fire, used generally by wandering monks for warmth or cooking.
- Dol-purnima*: An annual festival, in honour of Sri Krishna sporting on a swing, held on the full-moon day in early spring (March).
- Durga*: A name of the Divine Mother. As the consort of Shiva, she represents 'God as Mother', the supreme creative principle and the giver of plenty.
- Durga Puja*: The annual worship of Durga (*q.v.*), the Divine Mother, held in autumn, with elaborate rituals, singing, dancing and lots of food offering. In Bengal it is a five-day or sometimes nine-day (*see Nava-ratri*) celebration, at the end of which the image of Durga, modelled in clay for the occasion, is immersed in a lake or river.
- Ganga*: A well-known river in the north of India, referred to in English as 'Ganges'. Its water is sacred to the Hindus who regard it with deep spiritual significance.
- Gopi(s)*: (One of) the milkmaids of Brindavan, the childhood companions of Sri Krishna, well known for their deep devotion to him as God incarnate.
- Gram*: A kind of edible bean, similar to the chick-pea or the garbanzo.
- Guna*: Literally, 'quality, energy, or mood'. The created universe of mind and matter, called Prakriti, is composed of the 'Three Gunas' or 'types of energy', viz. Sattva, Rajas, Tamas. Man's mind assumes varying attitudes under the influence of the predominating Guna.

'Sattva' is the quality of balance and tranquil wisdom, pure and fine like clear sunlight. It inspires calmness and purity in man's mind.

'Rajas' is the quality of activity and movement, dynamic and exciting like a blazing fire. It arouses passions and restlessness.

'Tamas' is the quality of dullness and inertia, opaque and dense like darkness or a block of stone. It causes laziness and stupidity to overpower the mind.

Man's spiritual goal is to overcome Tamas by Rajas, then Rajas by Sattva, and finally transcend even Sattva, and become free from the Gunas.

Guru: Spiritual teacher.

Homa: The 'fire ceremony', as it may be termed, invariably follows the end of the main ritualistic worship and consists in offering oblations into a sacrificial fire, symbolizing personal purification and surrender to God.

Ishta: The 'Chosen Ideal', which usually is an aspect of the Godhead selected by an aspirant or by his Guru for him for the purpose of meditation on it.

Ishta-Kavacha: An amulet, containing the name of the wearer's Chosen Deity, constantly worn in contact with the body, as a protecting charm to ward off disease and evil.

Ishvarakotis: Sri Ramakrishna used this expression to designate some of his disciples as those belonging to the extraordinary class of saints who are eternally associated with God in close companionship. Such persons are born with a divine mission and are possessed of some of the special characteristics of Divine Incarnations.

Isvarakoti: (Same as *Ishvarakotis.*, *q.v.*).

Jamuna (*English: Jumna*): A sacred river in the north of India, associated with Sri Krishna.

Janmashtami: The Anniversary of Sri Krishna's birthday, in late summer.

Japa: Repetition of the Lord's name, usually one's own Mantra (*q.v.*), sometimes using a rosary.

Jivanmukta: Literally, 'Liberated while living'. One who has gained liberation from Maya and has attained the highest spiritual illumination while still living in the body and working for the good of others.

Jnana Yoga: The 'Path of Knowledge', which leads man to union with the Impersonal and Absolute Brahman through a process of analysis, discrimination, and transcendence.

Kala: Time. (Figuratively it also refers to age, death, or the Lord of Time).

Kala-azar: Literally, 'Black Disease'. A severe and often fatal tropical disease, affecting the spleen and causing gradual anaemia and emaciation.

Kama: Self-love, craving, or lust. (It also means legitimate desire whose fulfilment is one of the four goals of life).

Kamandalu: Water-vessel carried by monks.

Karma: Physical or mental acts, together with their consequences, continuously related to one another, as 'cause and effect', thus giving rise to a 'law' of Karma whereby an individual reaps the fruits of his own past lives' Karma in the present life. Karma is the driving force behind our selfish motives and doings, and yet it does not hinder our freedom of will.

Karma means also ritualistic worship and philanthropic deeds.

Karma-Yogi: A spiritual aspirant who seeks to realize God through the 'Path of Selfless Action'. More generally it refers to one who works without attachment, offering actions and their results to God as a sacrament.

Kirtan: Devotional singing of songs or chanting of hymns. Often done in groups, and occasionally accompanied by gentle dancing movement.

Kshatriya: One belonging to the second of the four Hindu castes, usually of royal descent or of political or military vocation.

Kundalini: Spiritual energy lying dormant in every individual, like a 'coiled serpent', waiting to be awakened by self-effort and divine grace.

Kutir: Hut or cottage.

Lalita Vistara: Well-known original book, in Pali, on the life and work of Buddha.

Lila Prasanga: Literally, 'story of divine play'. In the Ramakrishna Order, it refers to the great biography of Sri Ramakrishna by Swami Saradananda, originally in Bengali, and now translated into English under the title 'Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master'.

Loka: Celestial abode or a plane of existence.

Mahamaya: The Divine Mother of the universe, who projects the entire creation out of herself, preserves and protects it at her will, and ultimately withdraws it unto herself. In her divine play she veils man's vision and also, when prayed to, unveils the mystery of Maya (*q.v.*) and enables man to realize God.

As the Primordial Supreme Energy, she is known as Shakti, the 'Power' of Brahman, and from her originate all the forces in the world.

Mahapurush, *Mahapurushji*: Literally it means "great soul"; and the suffix "ji" is added to express greater respect. In the Ramakrishna Order, this name was almost always applied to Swami Shivananda, a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and the illustrious subject of this book. (Also see page 4, paragraph 2).

Mahasamadhi: The 'great Samadhi' or the final state of superconscious absorption. It is commonly used to indicate the passing or ultimate release from the body of a spiritually illumined person.

Malati: Fragrant white jasmine flower.

- Mantra*: Sacred name of God or a divine chant, corresponding to one's chosen spiritual ideal, given by the teacher to the disciple for regular repetition.
- Math*: A monastery.
- Maya*: Literally, 'illusion, enchantment'. In Vedanta philosophy, Maya is a basic concept relating the Absolute Brahman to the relative universe. It is, in a practical sense, the statement and experience of the fact of 'worldliness' and its twofold power of ignorance and allurements. In a spiritual sense, Maya, under divine dispensation, appears to control man's mind and ego, binding them to fleshly cravings and obscuring the presence and vision of God.
- Naishthika*: A resolute celibate who has renounced the worldly life, but has not taken the formal monastic vows of Sannyasa.
- Narasimha*: The fourth of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, known as the 'man-lion Avatar'.
- Narayana Upanishad*: One of the more commonly known Upanishads (*q.v.*) containing the rules of monasticism and certain texts used in ritual worship.
- Nasadiya Sukta*: The well-known Hymn of Creation, occurring in the Rig-Veda (*q.v.*) (X. 129. 1-7), in which God the Impersonal Absolute is represented as both the material and the efficient cause of the universe.
- Nava-ratri*: Literally, 'nine nights', it refers to the period of nine festive days during which the Divine Mother is worshipped in the form of Durga, in the autumn season.
- Nimitta*: Cause or the principle of causation.
- Nirvikalpa*: Also called 'Nirvikalpa Samadhi', which means 'Samadhi without change or distinction'. It refers to the second or higher of the two well-known states of God-union or transcendental consciousness, wherein the spiritual aspirant becomes completely absorbed in Brahman, free from all sense of duality. In Vedanta philosophy, this is considered the highest state of realization.
- Nitya-siddha*: An ever-perfect spiritually illumined person, belonging to a special class of rare souls. See Ishvarakoti.
- Panchavati*: A grove of five sacred trees (namely, banyan, fig, bel, amalaki, and ashoka) usually regarded as a congenial place for spiritual practice. The 'Panchavati' referred to in this book is the one planted by Sri Ramakrishna in the temple garden of Dakshineswar and used by him for his spiritual practices.
- Paramahansa*: Sri Ramakrishna was often referred to as 'the Paramahansa', meaning, 'an illumined person of great renunciation, belonging to one of the highest orders of the Knowers of Brahman.'
- Paramahansa Upanishad*: One of the less known Upanishads (*q.v.*), but important to monks. (Also see Paramahansa).
- Pari-nirvana*: Final release from the body.

- Prarabdha Karma:** Literally, 'The consequences of past actions that have already begun to bear fruit'. According to the Hindu doctrine of Karma, each individual has to reap the good and bad fruits of his own past actions, including those done in past lives. Of these past actions, the Prarabdha or that part which has begun to fructify in this life is more effective and binding than the other part which is not yet operative in the present life but is lying in store as 'accumulated' Karma.
- Prasad:** Any food or drink that has been offered ceremonially to God or to a saintly person and consequently is considered sacred and blessed.
- Prema:** Genuine devotion to and ecstatic love for God.
- Puja:** Ritualistic worship.
- Purnam:** Literally, 'that which is filled full'. It refers to God or Brahman which is always Infinite and Whole.
- Purusha Sukta:** A famous hymn of the Rig-Veda (*q.v.*) (X. 90) describing God, the Universal Being, and his manifestations.
- Rajas:** See Guna.
- Rajasika:** Pertaining to or possessed of the Guna of Rajas. (*See Guna*).
- Rig-Veda:** The most ancient of the four Vedas which are the scriptures of the Hindus.
- Sadhu:** A holy man, particularly a monk.
- Samadhi:** Complete and continuous concentration on the true nature of Reality; transcendental consciousness; superconscious communion with God. A mystical state of ecstatic absorption in which man realizes his union with God.
- Sannyas:** Monastic life. Also the ritual by which the vows are administered to and the monk's status is conferred upon the aspirant.
- Sannyasin:** A fully ordained (Hindu) monk who has taken the final vows of monasticism.
- Saraswati:** The Divine Mother in her aspect as the goddess presiding over learning, music and the fine arts.
- Satchidananda:** Sat, Chit, Ananda—Existence Absolute, Consciousness Absolute, Bliss Absolute. These three together form the only possible positive epithet of Brahman.
- Sattya:** See Guna.
- Sattvika:** Pertaining to or possessed of Sattva Guna. (*See Guna*).
- Savikalpa:** Also called 'Savikalpa Samadhi', which means 'Samadhi with change or distinction'. It refers to the first or lower of the two well-known states of God-union or transcendental consciousness, wherein the distinction between subject and object persists. (*See Nirvikalpa*).
- Sevashrama:** Home of service. In the Ramakrishna Mission, it refers to a monastery where medical care and service are rendered to the public.

- Shakta Tantra*: A school of Indian religious philosophy and practice relating to worship of God as the Mother of the Universe (Shakti), who is personified as Primal Energy or the Divine consort of Shiva.
- Shakti*: God as the Divine Mother; Mother Goddess as the ultimate Supreme Being. In the Tantra school of philosophy, where this aspect is most prevalent, Shakti is the dynamic creative Power of Brahman.
- Shiva-ratri*: Literally, 'Shiva's night'. An annual special worship of Shiva observed with meditation, singing, fasting, and all-night vigil.
- Shiva Vireshwara*: Lord Shiva in his special aspect as the Lord of the spiritually heroic souls.
- Shudra*: One belonging to the fourth of the four Hindu castes, whose occupation relates to the performance of manual labour and general service.
- Siddha Pitha*: 'The Seat of Perfection'. Refers to any sacred spot or shrine where holy persons have performed spiritual practices and attained supreme perfection.
- Srimad Bhagavatam*: A well-known devotional scripture of the Hindus, attributed to Vyasa, and containing the life and teachings of Sri Krishna together with a great many spiritual truths and anecdotes.
- Swadharma*: One's righteous duty or vocation in accordance with the law of one's own being or nature.
- Swaraj*: Self-government or independence.
- Tamas*: See Guna.
- Tamasika*: Pertaining to or possessed of the Guna of Tamas. (See Guna).
- Tulasi*: Indian basil, whose leaves are held sacred to Vishnu.
- Upanishads*: The Upanishads are the well-known scriptures of the Hindus, forming the end-portions as well as the philosophical and mystical parts of the Vedas.
- Vaikuntha*: The heavenly abode of Lord Vishnu.
- Vaishakh*: The first month of the Bengali calendar, approximately mid-April to mid-May.
- Vaishnava*: A follower of or anything pertaining to Vishnu and his Avatars (manifestations) such as Rama, Krishna, and Chaitanya.
- Vaishya*: One belonging to the third of the four Hindu castes, who engages himself in trade, commerce, and agriculture.
- Vedanta*: Literally, 'the end or last part of the Veda'. The Vedas constitute the ancient and original scriptures of the eternal religion of the Hindus. Hence Vedanta is also referred to as 'Hinduism'. Based largely on the Upanishads and practised through the centuries, Vedanta takes a leading place among the different systems of Hindu religious thought and discipline.
- Vidyamandira*: Temple of learning or knowledge, as referring to a school or college.

Viraja Homa: A time-honoured and traditional monastic ritual, with oblations offered into a fire, to signify renunciation and purity.

Vishnupurana: A classical and mythological scripture, having Lord Vishnu as its central theme and expounding spiritual knowledge and devotion through simple illustrations. It is one of the eighteen sacred books of the Hindus called the Puranas.

Vishwanath: Name of Shiva, in his aspect as the 'Lord of the Universe, worshipped at Benares.

Yogi: One who practises Yoga or has become an embodiment of such practice.

Yogin: Swami Yogananda, monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

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