

**The Lotus  
and The Flame**



**Monastic Teachings of Swami Asehananda**

# *The Lotus and the Flame*

MONASTIC TEACHINGS OF  
SWAMI ASESHANANDA

## Foreword

The lotus is the symbol of bhakti-marga, the way of devotion, and the flame of jnana-marga, the way of discrimination. In his teachings, Swami Aseshananda (1900-1996), late Head of the Vedanta Society of Portland, Oregon, clearly delineated these two, yet in his life beautifully blended the fragrance of love and the fire of knowledge. He was a spiritual child of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, who gave him initiation when he was very young. And he was an Advaita Vedantin, repeatedly reminding listeners of hard realities which cut through all sorts of sentimentality.

It has been my intention for some time to publish these notes, recorded in 1950 and 1951. At that time, Swami Aseshananda was Assistant Minister of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and the resident guide at the Monastery, which had been founded at Trabuco Canyon only the year before. He was our "novice master."

Many of these notes were taken at sessions held outdoors on the brow of the great hill on which the Trabuco monastery is built. As he spoke, we looked out across the seventeen-mile stretch to the sea, near Laguna Beach, attempting to grasp these truths as they literally tumbled from his lips. Today, these notes can be best appreciated when read along with the various texts to which they refer.

We publish these brief notes with full awareness of their inadequacy to portray either the Swami's wide learning or his affectionate inner nature. I knew the Swami when he was only forty-nine years old, not in the maturity of his life of spiritual direction. His resources and his wisdom were apparent even then, yet few of us ever suspected his power or his greatness. Not having had the privilege of much association with him in later years, I have not attempted to depict here his life or character. Hopefully others will undertake to do this.

May this booklet serve as a small token offered in gratitude for the many blessings received from him!

Swami Yogeshananda  
The Eternal Quest  
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## PART ONE

From a Class on the *Katha Upanishad*

Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon, 1950

Vedanta means the Upanishads. This [Katha Upanishad] is shown to be a major one by the fact that Sankara has written a commentary on it. Indeed, it is a **very** important one, dealing with what follows death. It was the favorite of Swami Vivekananda.

At the start of each major Upanishad there is a "peace-chant"; why each chant ends with *santih*\* repeated thrice is explained by the three types of obstructions to our well-being: those arising from natural disasters, those arising from unseen forces above and beyond us and those arising from our own make-up. *Om* begins the chant. *Om* has its own, very deep, philosophy. *Om* is also called *pranava*, or *anahata*, the "unstruck" sound.

We shall use Swami Prabhavananda's translation of the Upanishad in his book, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*.

**On a certain occasion...** The occasion was a sacrifice performed by householders, in expectation of obtaining a certain reward.

***sraddha***... an affirmative attitude toward life.

**like corn...** This passage presents the reincarnation doctrine as it was conceived at the time. A householder is expected to perform a sacrifice in five directions: he has a debt to the gods (the forces controlling nature) and to the "fathers" (which is study of the scriptures), to men, to the animals and to a guest at the house.

\* The first time a particular Sanskrit word is used, it will be italicized. Thereafter, it will not.



**first of the boons...** is the appeasement of his father. Note it well, for this was the attitude Nachiketas cherished, in spite of his father's indictment.

**second boon...** He is asking for a relative immortality, gained by way of a sacrifice. What results is called *krama-mukti*, gradual emancipation.

**an extra boon...** this will be a sacrifice named for him. But how can liberation in this life be attained? Is there anything that survives death? This is what he is really concerned about.

**third boon...** Nachiketas insists it be this knowledge. Remember Sankara's four requisites for a student of Vedanta: human birth, study of the Vedas, longing for liberation and taking refuge in a competent teacher. Yama is the name of a soul in a certain position, here the supervisor of death. This particular soul was a knower of Brahman, but getting the position of a god does not grant knowledge of Brahman.

**secret of immortality...** Here it is the absolute kind, by which is meant giving the state of *jivanmukti* (free while living in the body).

**pleasant...** We all know it: the path of enjoyment.

**good...** means the path of renunciation.

**the miry way...** wherein one gets stuck by wallowing. Sankara also mentions the four qualifications for the Vedanta teacher. The blind must be led by a **seer**. The word *guru* is said to be derived from *gu*, darkness, and *ru*, remover.

**He falls again and again...** this is Yama's reply.

**taught by a good teacher...** one of realization, not merely an ethical person.

**truth of the Self...** Self can never become the object; it is always the witness, beyond subject/object relationship, beyond logic.

Yama got his position through sacrifice, so he very well knows one

cannot get eternal life through transitory things.

**The ancient, effulgent being...** The word *purana* actually implies unchanging; effulgent means the very principle of consciousness. Atman is hidden in the "lotus of the heart"—hence the need of meditation.

**free from grief...** We won't be fully free until we have realization.

**the goal is Om...** Why? Because we consider this the greatest of all symbols; nothing else can so well epitomize the goal.

Every material thing undergoes the sixfold transformation of birth, survival, maturity, transformation, decay and death.

**smaller than the smallest—larger than the largest...** It does not mean that the Self has size; it indicates that It is beyond our categories.

**at rest, he moves all things...** in deep sleep (for he pervades all).

**seated, he travels far...** in waking and dream.

**Brahmins and Ksatriyas become food...** This is a poetic way of saying that they bow down in reverence (not that such a person wants it).

In the cave of the heart are two souls, individual and universal: what is the difference between them? The same as between shade and light. But in reality, none. Sankara's famous half-verse is, *Brahma satyam, jagan mithya, jiva brahmaiva narah*. It is important to notice that *avidya* (ignorance) is a positive thing, according to Vedanta. It has two aspects or functions, concealing and projecting.

**knowers of Brahman...** *nirguna* Brahman, here. But there are not two Brahman! So long as we are using mind and intellect we cannot conceive (i.e., reach) *nirguna* Brahman. The *jiva* can never become *Isvara*, as it is said: the clay mouse cannot become the clay elephant. Knowledge of both the personal God—"a hand to heal and a heart to feel"—leading to *kramamukti*, and of the impersonal

God, leading to jivanmukti, are necessary for complete knowledge. Yama and others speak of *lokas*, heavenly planes of existence, but we have to realize that **this** is Ramakrishna loka, right here.

**The self is the rider...** in this chariot of the body. Note well: it is not the Self as pure consciousness, but the ignorant self.

There are ten outer organs and four inner aspects of our mind (*manas, buddhi, citta, ahankara*); **memory**... is the coming to consciousness of impressions from the *citta*, the storehouse of these.

**control**... It is important to realize that this does **not** mean repression. Senses, body, mind, must be kept strong and alert. Repression (as for example, not-seeing) only deadens the senses. The senses should see, move with their objects; but intellect interprets, and here lies the auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of sense contact. We want freedom **from**, not freedom **of**, the senses.

**intellect**... must possess two qualities: discrimination and determination. The question arises, Is control "unnatural?" Not at all. It is most natural. To feel this, you have to practice it carefully and at length.

**abode of Vishnu**... it sounds like a celestial place, but Sankara interprets this as Brahman, beyond any space. The world is born of desire, according to Buddhists, so to renounce the world is to give up desire. But the approach of Katha Upanishad is a bit different. To go beyond the world means the fulfillment of all desires.

**senses derive from physical objects**... How so? It seems just the opposite. Physical objects here means the rudimentary elements: light has produced our eyes, the touch-element has produced our skin, and so on. Did you ever think of looking at it this way? This is one explanation given by Vedanta.

**Evolution**... this is the sequence: unmanifested *prakriti* > *ahankara* (universal ego) > *Hiranyagarbha*. Brahman is inaccessible to the senses. But Sri Ramakrishna says pure intellect and pure Spirit are one. Brahman is the **goal**, but it is not in space.

Senses > mind > intellect > Brahman

Senses > mind > intellect > Cosmic Mind. Sankara's interpretation is that the maya of the Cosmic Mind does not bind the Lord but acts as a thin veil between Him and the Absolute (the veil of "inside differentiation") and it must be transcended. *Prapya* = obtaining, *varan* = a great one, *nibodhata* = learn. "Stop not till the goal is reached," is the way Swamiji translated this.

**difficult to tread**... but don't be nervous: both our strength and our balance increase as we go along.

Brahman's only characteristic is joy, but not a dependent joy. It comes from "I know not what." Mind cannot know the Self for two reasons: it is material, so cannot apprehend the immaterial, and it is the instrument **of** the Self.

There are two kinds of illusory reality: *pratibhasika satta*, privately illusory, and *vyavaharika satta*, world-illusory.

For realization we must have a purified intellect and concentration (through control).

(Narrator's speech here:) "**rewards immeasurable**" is a kind of eulogy.

**Brahmins**... Here it means seekers after God.

**eyes inward**... means all senses of perception.

**fools**... The word is also used for children. Like a road sign, "Two bad curves ahead," are ignorance and desire.

Why do we say "the senses perceive"? They perceive by a borrowed light, all **objects** are material.

There are not really many souls; there may be many empirical, or embodied, souls. A *jivanmukta* will become Godlike, but will never become the Personal God.

How can one “kill the soul”? Sankara says it is not to be taken literally but figuratively—not to be aware of the soul and its glories. Self is the seer. If consciousness were in the **object**, then couldn't a tree know a wall and a wall a tree?

For an Advaitin there is no meditation, one can say, because all is negation, in that approach. So we should meditate on the Personal God.

The Samkhya system consists of the 24 *tattvas*, material principles, and soul is the 25th, or principle of consciousness.

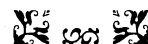
**agni**... Another name for him is *Virat*. It is the symbol of the householder, not the sannyasin.

**Hiranyagarbha**... prana (cosmic).

**within or without**... or, here and there. Jiva is nothing but Brahman. Personal God and individual soul both are Brahman—the former conditioned by cosmic ignorance, the latter by individual ignorance.

**if he sees any duality**... then there is fear. One must merge in It. At first, senses are the *drasta*, the seer, while “objects” are *drsya*, seen; then senses become realized as part of the *drsya* too; then mind, then intellect, till we reach the Atman.

All is accomplished by purification of the mind, for which we need a teacher's instruction and spiritual disciplines.



## PART TWO

From a Class on the *Bhagavad Gita*, selected chapters

Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon, 1951-1952

(The chapters were not taken up in numerical sequence)

We shall be using Swami Swarupananda's translation, which has the verse numbers.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

This chapter is a favorite of the monks in North India, and is often chanted before meals and at death. One reason is its shortness and another is that it is a mixture of knowledge and devotion.

**1. asvattha**... It refers to the world-process. It's a fig or banyan tree.

**everlasting**... in the sense that it will reappear in the cycles of creation.

**rooted above**... in the Personal God (Brahman with *maya*), not in matter.

**branches below**... such as *mahat* (cosmic intelligence), egoism, etc.

**Vedas**... Here, the Karma-kanda, the ritual portions, are meant.

**leaves**... as leaves protect the tree.

**knows it**... one who knows that all the Vedas cannot save us from the hand of death.

**2. downward and upward**... One can go to the heavens or to the subhuman levels, according to one Vedantic theory.

**fed by the gunas**... the world of change.

**buds are the sense-objects...** We are mad for sense-objects.  
**roots below...** the secondary roots. Such trees put roots back down to the earth from their branches. The tap-root is above, but the secondary roots are the **desires** in the subconscious, the latent impressions. But these must be scorched as well as recognized.

**3. not here perceived...** as it really is, for there are so many theories about the form, origin, etc., of the world-process; this is why there are so many agnostics among us.

**axe of discrimination...** This is to be sharpened daily!

**4. renunciation...** of desire for wife, children, possessions, fame. Why? Because they are fraught with fear and pain-bearing. Buddha said, "All the tears shed in the world will exceed the oceans put together." Satisfaction is found in the changeless only. We must therefore stay in one place.

In the Gita we have both the negative and the positive, like the two wings of a bird—*tyaga* and *yoga*.

**seek refuge in the Primal Being...** meditation on God according to the guru's instructions. When we find God we are only then able to know the origin, etc., of the world.

**5. dwelling in the Self...** We should find this in all our activities.  
**opposites...** We must not be disturbed by external praise or blame, nor by fluctuations of the mind. Sri Ramakrishna says, "One who has equanimity of mind has already attained realization."

**there the sun does not shine...** There is no place on earth like this: it is a plane of consciousness—*samadhi*. Sri Ramakrishna remained in this for six months. Ordinary souls can stay but twenty-one days at most.

The discovery of the unreality of the world is really a re-interpretation of the Reality which is there.

**not reborn...** not in ignorance, not unwillingly.

**10.** We need not take literally Buddha's resolution about not leaving his seat until enlightenment comes. It means "I shall not leave this seat for years: not until I attain illumination." Theoretically the state

of *gunatita* can be experienced even in the midst of work; but **actually** it occurs only in the depths of meditation. This is because we **must** realize the unreality of the world.

**12.** These next three verses speak of the immanence of God.

**fire...** It is not just because it is a wonder, warms us, etc., that we regard fire highly, but because God is the energy behind it.

**13.** What is outside vanishes away, but what is inside remains.

**14. four kinds of food...** that which is sucked, licked, chewed or swallowed.

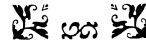
**15. in the hearts of all...** There is a special place where he can be seen, like the President of the U. S. There we go within, we meditate. Instinct, reason, intuition are the stages of the maturing of the human mind. Can one realize God without any meditation? Theoretically it should be possible, but actually it is impossible, since our vision **must** be purified.

**I am known through the Vedas...** It is he who is indicated by all scriptures. If one becomes a good musician, one must become the music, as it were.

**16.** In this and the following two verses the Impersonal is emphasized.

**17. Perishable...** Sankara says these are two persons—conditions of the Supreme Reality—perishable personality (the world of name and form), and imperishable personality (*avyakta*, or seed-form). Both are forms of *prakriti*, called here "*purusha*" only by courtesy. This is his interpretation.

**18. with his whole heart...** This shows it is not a dry intellectual thing. To know God is to love Him. First we worship outside; then we worship inside—the immanent; finally the distinction between inside and outside vanishes. Thus the Vedantic conception of *nirvikalpa* *samadhi* differs from the Yogic: in the latter one goes inside only—and stays there. The Yogic *nirvikalpa* is also called *yogic* or unconscious (*jada*) *samadhi*. We are to be *vijnanis*: we do not negate anything, we are not of the *Totapuri* type.



## CHAPTER TWELVE (Bhakti Yoga)

**1.** Many so-called monists are children in the field of religion; they talk much about the worship of the Impersonal, but do not yet have the inner transformation. Here, Arjuna asks, "Who is the better one, the jnani or the bhakta?"

**2.** Sri Krishna speaks here to Arjuna's own condition, advocating worship of the Personal. The Personal God need not have form, but is, as Ramanuja says, the embodiment of all blessed qualities.

**3.** "I don't want to be sugar, I want to taste sugar." This is a question of temperament. Strong will and complete control of the senses is required for knowledge of the Impersonal. But intellectual understanding alone will fall far short.

**4, 5.** So long as we have body-consciousness we can scarcely worship the Absolute. Sri Krishna says both are right, depending on temperament and stage of development. But Sankara interprets this worship of the Personal as advice to the householders. Sri Ramakrishna says this is a distinction without a difference: the Personal is the same Being as the Impersonal.

Advaita consciousness is an experience, not a speculation. Complete mergence, *sayujya mukti*, is the goal of the jnani. For devotees: *samipya*, nearness, *salokya*, dwelling in the same world with the Lord, and *sasti*, having all the powers of God (except creation, preservation and destruction of the universe) are appropriate. What the Lord enjoys, he enjoys, etc.

**6, 7. Offer everything to Me...** It is the conscious principle behind a material object that attracts us, not the mere physical "beauty." This is an act of grace. God **responds** — he is not like a

doll. But we must be patient and long-suffering. When we no longer want any return, the return will come. Our position is always to be that of the giver, not the receiver.

**8.** Here he means giving up outward activity and sitting in a special place at a special time. In concentration, time flows by without our knowledge and one forgets the body.

**9.** But absorption is not easy; so *abhyasa yoga*, constant practice, is prescribed. Why be satisfied with so little?

**10.** The next best thing is to work for Him; it is an asset to meditation.

**11.** Here we say, "I have failed. **You** must do something."

**12.** Control is not suppression, mark you.

Mechanical repetition is the lowest, then reflection on its meaning and discussion, then meditation (on the form).

Subjective and objective meditation are possible. Symbols are used by everyone — poets, musicians, artists. Thought is sub-vocal speech. A mantra is like a slogan. As monastics our symbol is renunciation, through which we aim at a double goal — the salvation of our own soul and the good of humanity.

There are four obstacles to control of the mind:

- *laya*, inadvertence, torpidity.
- *vikshepa*, perturbation, from conscious things.
- *kasaya*, violent emotion, lust, coming from old impressions.
- *rasavadana*, enjoyment of bliss. This last is an obstacle because it is still from the contact of senses with their objects. The presence of God must be felt throughout all times, not just in ecstasies and meditation.

Perspiration comes before inspiration.

Concentration comes from interest, it is true; but interest is increased by repeated effort. The first stage is always glamorous. Then comes disillusionment and often a reaction or maladjustment. Then come subconscious impressions and uncertainty about the future.

But tell yourself, "I cannot go back." **Talk freely and frankly to your teacher.** The ego is not killed by repression; a passive attitude is not good. The ego must be expressed, then comes the power to root it out. Work sacramentally, and see how it helps concentration. Make **no** distinction between kinds of work. "We are to have so much work that we have no time for idle thoughts," said Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda). Everyone in the monastery must feel that **he** is essential, forming a link of the chain. By work alone, however, it is very difficult; you see, Albert Schweitzer was a remarkable man, but he was not a mystic; his philosophy was one of biological humanism, "reverence for **life**," and by this he meant human life.

There must also be meditation. One who seeks leadership (for himself) will not get it. It comes as a natural thing, to one who does not crave it. We do **not** renounce renunciation. Ritual ripens into prayer, prayer into japa, japa into meditation.

"How long must I do japa?" At least three years, the great swamis have said.

Then some real assurance comes. Do it until continual God-consciousness comes.

Ours is now a monologue; a time will come when it is a dialogue, i.e., God will appear, will talk.

**13, 14.** These are the characteristics of the monk; the sannyasin is dearest to him.

**hates no being...** To hate others is to hate oneself.

**compassionate...** having an attitude of service with reverence. How can we practice this toward those who would harm us? Sankara spoke of *maitri*, practicing "general friendship." *Karuna* is compassion toward the unhappy; this is stronger. *Modita* is rejoicing with others, and *upeksha* is indifference to the wicked. These are the four recommended attitudes.

**even in pain and pleasure...** Be like the screen on which the movies are shown.

**steady in contemplation...** Obstacles come from stored-up impressions. Good days and bad come in contemplation; it is like cleaning a fountain pen—how many times you have to flush it with water! Say, "I must continue my practice whether I get joy, peace, etc., or not." The Master's (Sri Ramakrishna's) call from the roof-top is still going out—we have answered it and have come; so our first step is fine, but we must not become complacent.

**15. not disturbed by the world...** Part of this, for us, is keeping our own prestige, honor, dignity, etc., as monks—in the **early** stages; we must not try to be paramahansas nor become the subject of idle talk on the part of others. Later on, the case is different; later even the pride in our monkhood will be overcome.

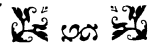
**16. pure...** Do not be disturbed by impure thoughts, thinking, "Oh, now I have become impure." We are children of the Master, our nature is already pure, nothing can taint it. Just now we are either in the emotional or intellectual plane: these we must transcend and reach the spiritual plane.

**17. He who neither rejoices nor hates...** It is a counsel of perfection and comes only upon realizing God. Renunciation, activities for purifying the mind, unbroken meditation: these are our means. It doesn't mean that one becomes like a stone, non-reactive. Steadiness, persistence, is the key.

**18, 19.** Emotions which come during meditation must not be externally expressed if one is meditating with others, out of consideration for them. Also one must not force others to accept one's own serious mood which may come after meditation; that is often a time for joking, relaxing, etc., as in the case of Maharaj.

**20.** Practice and self-surrender. But self-surrender is not a passive attitude. Cf. Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven." "Naked I await Thy love's uplifted stroke." Why wait for death-bed realization?





## CHAPTER SIX

**3.** This verse does not mean that a monk will work for the first three or four years, then begin a life of meditation. It is meant for householders, and says: Do your duties in the world and fit yourself for intense spiritual life. Work, study and meditation make up our life. Forced work is of little value; here in the monastery there is at least a certain amount of willingness.

But tremendous workers must be wary of not wanting to go to the shrine room, pujas etc., for work has a fascination which can make us extroverted and reputation-seeking and restless if we don't have it.

**work...** Here it means prompted by desire. In Swami Saradananda's life we see the literal example of this verse. As General Secretary of the Order he did so much work, not one iota of it prompted by personal desire or done with attachment!

Mind wants new things: that is its nature. But a spiritual aspirant knows that peace of mind comes not from a change of environment.

Group meditation *vs* individual meditation: Swami Adbhutananda liked the latter. But the Order—especially Swamiji—favors group meditation. The fruit of meditation, realization, is nothing but the unbroken remembrance of the Lord.

**5.** A most quoted verse. Let one not depend on anything for one's spiritual progress, it tells us. Then why have initiation, guru and all that? Because these external helps are the stimuli to inner unfoldment.

**let one not lower oneself...** means not choose the pleasant over the good.

Realization is a **timeless** experience. Renunciation—but for what? To build our inner fortress.

**6.** The apparent self must be the friend of the real Self; the ego must surrender itself to God. Self-control is the panacea. It is not suppression. Control gives power to dominate the mind. Methodical life is necessary, and control should be both external and internal. Real control will be when we do not react. The whole message of the Gita is, "Be calm; don't lose your temper." Swami Premananda used to give sweet words to the boys who came to visit; but if you joined—only scolding. If you ask why, we have to say that this was **his** method, the way he worked best. Swami Saradananda on the other hand was always gentle and pleasant.

**7.** The dualities remain, but the inner reaction is different. Contemplation is the rock on which the wise man built his house (referring to the parable in the New Testament).

[At this point in the class the translation of Swami Swarupananda was replaced by the new Swami Prabhavananda-Christopher Isherwood translation, and verse numbering ceases.]

**He who regards with an eye that is equal...** Perfection consists in seeing Brahman in all. Sri Ramakrishna worshiped even a prostitute as the embodiment of the Divine Mother.

**The yogi should retire into a solitary place...** The means to attain the goal are given here. A quiet corner of your room will do. Sri Ramakrishna said that three places are important: the mind, the forest and a secluded corner (*mone, bone, kone* in Bengali).

**and live alone...** Then why do we live together? It is to be taken in spirit; it means alone with God, where there can be no attachment.

Whatever the posture, it should be kept the same and in the same place. Meditation is, in a sense, creative thought. You will come to feel that to feel you lack him is as good as to meet him. Whatever material your *asana* is made of, it should be for the purpose of medi-

tation only.

**as he sits there...** It requires practice. Where do all these disturbances come from? From the subconscious. Patanjali lists five: ignorance, egoism, attraction, repulsion, clinging to life. There are three qualities: vegetable, animal, human. Freedom of the senses does not lead to freedom from the senses. The way of the *Sunyavadins* and other Buddhists of making the mind absolutely vacant is not so healthy. It is dangerous, for it allows old impressions to arise. So we emphasize concentrating on the Chosen Ideal — at least an aspect of Divinity having name and form.

Thus we are humanizing God, as it were, in order to divinize the human being.

God-realization is this: feeling that all our present actions are being done by him, and I have become nothing.

**vision indrawn... tip of the nose...** It is better to close our eyes completely, and not look about us, nor hear what goes on.

**Renunciation...** *brahmacharya*... Two symbols common in Hinduism are the lotus and the flame. The former is for the followers of the Personal, the latter is taken by the followers of the Impersonal. There are objective meditations; these two are subjective.

**eyes on me...** Give him all your attention.

**struggle...** How long? It depends on our longing. No one can say. Spiritual life is a life of balance. "Dryness" will come—it is a natural thing, but if we persist it will go. Concentration leads to meditation which in turn leads to samadhi. Here all is silence.

**Yoga is not for him...** The golden mean, discovered by the Buddha. So why did Sri Ramakrishna not sleep for six years? This came to him unsought, involuntarily. But the monastic ideal must be uncompromising—complete renunciation and love of the brothers. As C.G. Jung says, "Strengthen your weak points, weaken your strong points."

When will it take away our unhappiness? It takes at least six

years, usually, to get a little glimpse of joy. Before that it is all ebb-tide and flow-tide. First of all (maybe a year) is beginner's luck, romanticism. Then comes depression, disillusionment; the gold is being melted in the fire (about three years). The next period is one of new ideas (say, two years), ebb-tide and flow, some encouragement. After these six years comes steadiness.

When can one expect to have realization? Everyone asks when, when, when? It is a timeless experience. But about six years is a good average, for one who is sincere.

**flame which does not flicker...** Say NO ADMITTANCE to negative thoughts at the time of meditation. No worries, no anxieties. Patanjali's Yoga describes five states of mind: *mudha*, deluded; *ksipta*, restless; *viksipta*, scattered; *ekagra*, one-pointed; *niruddha*, controlled.

Calmness of mind will give purity of mind, for then can be seen what lies on the bottom of the lake.

**Objective** meditation is on the Personal God and its prevailing thought is, "I want to realize God." **Subjective** meditation is on the Impersonal. "What am I?" is the prevailing thought.

Our conception of Sri Ramakrishna changes with our mental and spiritual growth. At first he is an historical figure, then the immanent Spirit, finally the Universal Spirit within and without.

Atman cannot be realized indirectly. True knowledge is by identity. Self cannot be known by logic. The Self is *buddhi-grahyam-atindriyam*: it can be grasped by the intellect—beyond the senses; "grasped," but not as an object. Even if one sees ignorance the day after realization, it will not delude one.

**breaking of the contact with pain...** will one not feel a dagger's thrust? Yes. It is a mental attitude. In a true yogi there is no manifestation of miracles. The Master refers to the simile of the green coconut and the ripe coconut. In the former everything inside is fastened tight, and you hear the sloshing sound of the water; in the

latter the kernel is separated inside and will rattle against the shell. Actually there is no malady of the **soul** ; it is of the apparent self.

**Renounce all desires...** It doesn't mean shutting oneself in the closet. Sri Ramakrishna said to give a new turn to our desires. Patience is what we lack most. Distractions are: (*tamasic*) sloth, inadvertence; (*rajasic*) mind becomes scattered and restless. Don't be distracted. Instead, follow your plan.

Three of the four great goals or values of life can degenerate. *dharma*, ethical perfection, can become enlightened selfishness; *artha*, economic security, can become greed; *kama*, esthetic sensibility, can become sensuality. *Mukti* means freedom from all these bonds of matter. Patanjali mentions disease, anxious brooding, negative thoughts, as mental distractions. If all things are ephemeral, why not "eat, drink and be merry?" Because, he says, where there is enjoyment there is fear of illness. One eventually finds that there is a much greater and higher pleasure than that of the senses.

The other side is that you are then established in the Atman. This is the only thing you can take with you when it's time to leave. **Atman...** Literally the word means "stuff," essence. Sankara says there may be a plurality of souls, but only from the relative point of view. Keep up equanimity, i.e., be grounded in the Self as witness. Five evils are spoken of: ignorance, egoism, attachment, hatred and clinging to life. The world is like a strong acid—it looks like water, but touch it and it burns! In this early stage, the **will** is directed toward God, but the mind is unemployed. Both must be combined into the will-to-meditate, which is the essence of meditation.

**p. 85...** This is the state of jivanmukti. Only one who has realized can say that he sees Brahman everywhere. "World" is change, phenomena. Why should we be altruistic? One answer is, to keep society together. Another is, because it is the nature of the one unbroken Soul. The truth is that all souls have already realized—this is what the realized person sees in the transcendental state. The teacher's

harsh methods with a disciple is **not** a process of conversion (from a "sinful soul" to a spiritual one); it is that he sees the spring of Divinity hidden by a rock.

Have advaita-jnana, knowledge of non-duality, first—then see all as divine.

Mere work, not considered as spiritual discipline, is not productive of realization.

**Who burns with the bliss...** This is the test of God-realization: an identification with all humanity. But then the question arises, will there be any peace at all? Problems are unending, and to become frustrated futilely over far-away problems is really sentimentalism. Take care of the problems that come to hand. The point is, so long as a realized person keeps a body, he or she is not to be like a stone, with no feelings. Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji exemplified this.

Arjuna's question ("**the mind is so restless... how shall he tame it?**"): Every aspirant asks this. Sri Krishna does not reply "just prostrate before Me twice a day," or offer Arjuna any crutches. *Abhyasa* and *vairagya* are the prescription.

Marriage is a concession to human weakness. True meditation cannot be had without complete continence; but a life of complete continence cannot be lived without deep meditation. It is a circle.

There are three essential practices in monastic life: study, work and meditation—food for the intellect, for the will and for the affect. Cover all work with the spirit of God. Merely making the mind vacant will not be good, for nature abhors a vacuum. The subconscious has not been taken care of in such cases. Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) says, "*japat siddhi*" (perfection comes through japa); when the mind is troubled, do japa.

First feel that the monastery compound is being hovered over by the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna. Then later you can spread this to the whole world. Even when you are in time, see Eternity.

Arjuna's next question: When a man goes astray from the

path... Sri Krishna's answer is a great consolation. A fall gives experience. Remember Swamiji's poem? "O blessed fall!"

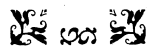
If coming to a monastery is an "escape," we shall call it a temporary escape, for once we are spiritually strong we again go back to the world and become real uplifters. This is necessary; don't hide your light under a bushel.

**Even in spite of himself... he will be driven on toward union...** This is a ticklish point; it probably does not mean "without effort," but that the drive toward yoga will come from the subconscious. Worldly life will not satisfy him. Unless we become disgusted with the world, we cannot really think of God, no matter how we may talk. One who really knows the will of God will hold to that conviction even if all the world says he or she is wrong. [Adding a rare personal note Swami Aseshananda said:] I am not sure that this is my last birth, in spite of what Sri Ramakrishna says; it all depends on how I will feel at the moment of death, whether I am fully aware at that moment that the world is unreal and he alone is present.

One Western psychologist, MacTaggart, had a view like that of Vedanta: the soul pre-exists, and time is illusory.

The chorus of the Song (*Gita*) is: be a yogi. A yogi is one who has *aparoksha-anubhuti*, not-indirect perception. "Seeing" God is not the seeing of material objects, because he cannot be an object. Experience is the greatest teacher. Swamiji says, "Love knows no fear, knows no rival, knows no bargaining. Love, lover and beloved become one. Dualists will say that the distinction between the enjoyer and enjoyed will always remain.

Three chief ways to work: (1) accompanied by japam but with external perfection of skill; (2) feeling that he is by our side, looking upon everything; and (3) the Advaitic idea — body, mind, senses are working; I am only the witness.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Yoga here means a frame of mind which places God first, everything else second. Lower knowledge (*aparavidya*) is science, art, music, technology.

Jnana is theoretical knowledge, vijnana, practical application, or "wisdom."

The Upanishads use the word jnana to mean thorough scriptural knowledge, the ability to expound the Vedanta philosophy.

**That which is the principle...** We may say "I am the Atman" a thousand times, but we still have false expectations, etc. An **organic craving** for God is required, the yearning of the whole personality. This knowledge is our **birthright!** Don't wait for nature; man is the one rebellious child of nature; he can control.

Where does the fire get its power to burn? A spiritual interpretation is that it comes from a spiritual source, an unmoved Mover, in contrast to materialistic ones which say it is the nature of the material itself.

**Life of all lives...** Compare this with Albert Schweitzer's view, biological humanism. All austerity in a noble cause, such as God-realization, is good.

**eternal seed...** All other seeds decay, or perish, when the plants grow out of them; that is not true of Brahman.

**strength...** soul-force, not brute force; love, self-sacrifice. Christ a man of sorrows? We do not think so. He is always ready to wipe the tears of the distressed, but in a man of illumination there is no sorrow. When and if we become strong, calm and unruffled, and get a divine commission to go into the world and serve troubled souls, that is a different story.

**All that a man may desire...** The desire for God is no desire at all. Be free from *kama*, longing for things not present to the senses. Raga is attachment for things not present to the senses.

**They are in me...** It seems there is no mutual relationship here; how so? There are two ways to look at it: the world is a superimposition on Brahman (Advaita), or, He is immanent, but non-attached (dvaita). Why not “the part is in the whole, but the whole is not in the part?” That is impossible, if it is an organic unity. If something happens to a part it will happen to the whole. Be a vijnani and live on the threshold between the Absolute and the relative.

**In this, my Maya...** Whatever we do, we are under the spell of maya. It is very hard to cross over; but there is a way out. Take refuge in Him. We cannot purify our own mind, we cannot rid ourselves of desire. It is the minnow that can go against the stream, not the elephant.

Self-surrender means unbroken remembrance of God. When Girish Ghosh gave Sri Ramakrishna the “power of attorney,” he thought he had scored a mark. But he found out! To understand that it is God who is working requires life-long spiritual practice. When we find that we cannot cross the stream we call on the Ferryman to take us across.

See Swamiji’s three lectures in *Jnana Yoga* for a correct understanding of maya. It is like the spectrum and the prism: on this side we see the seven colors; on the other, only the white light. So this is a **spectral** world!

Become an onlooker of the moods of the mind. If we take shelter under a huge tree we will get shade—not under a creeper! When our impurities are washed away by the tears of love, then we will be drawn to the divine Magnet.

**Four types of men worship me...** We cannot change our past, but we can use our present to affect our future; so it is not fatalism. The first type are old men and women in the evening of life; they have tasted and found it bitter. The second are enquirers, wanting to know what this is all about, whether death swallows all. The third are like the boys who become very religious just before final exams. The

fourth man asks nothing of God— simply loves him whether he is loved or not. He cannot give up spiritual practices for it has become his nature. Here “jnani” means a person of spiritual wisdom in general. We must transcend intellect because intellect is in maya and we cannot know darkness by darkness. Brahman is “all” in the sense that It is the unity behind all diversity.

Spiritual pleasure comes not from the contact of the senses with their objects, but from purity of the mind. Some experiences in life we have to have; others we can get by imaginative identification. So it is not necessary that a monk know all about married life in order to advise married people. And it is not necessary or desirable to have “all experiences before taking to religion,” as some people think.

Institutions go through these stages: indifference (on the part of the public), recognition (accompanied by the dangers of name and fame-seeking and loss of intensity). The success of the institution depends on its production of saintly characters, contemplatives, integrated personalities. All work should be spiritualized. Have we really renounced the world? Only when we have renounced subtle desires. Do not brood over them—give them no significance.

**Great ones...** *mahatma*—not the Theosophical type; rather, a brahma-jnani. Such a person lives in the body, gets “angry,” “hungry,” moves and acts like us but knows *vasudeva sarvamiti*, the Supreme Soul is everything. Every one of the Master’s disciples felt that he loved him the most! The love of a great soul is like that—no partiality.

Nature is for the soul, not the soul for nature.

**will come to me...** It doesn’t mean going any place, but rather realizing the Supreme. The sign of a realized person is that he or she is awake where we are all asleep.

**Am become man...** Very few can understand the Divine Incarnation. Maya is the limitation of our human intellect.

We do not know how the Absolute has become the manifest. Maya is a world-illusion, not a private illusion; but both have to be removed. All our struggle is to go beyond Nature. How are we to work and yet know that we are not working? It is a great secret. There is a story of the Russian general whose chest was covered with medals. Asked by someone at a party to explain how he acquired each one, the general, who perhaps had had one drink too many, replied in a tone of great secrecy, "You see this big one at the top? I got it by mistake, confused with another man of the same name," he said. "All the others followed from that one." Maya is like that—from one first mistake all our troubles follow.

We cannot know the Avatar as bodiless Spirit until we know ourselves as such. Ramanuja said, Eternity has *become* time. Sankara said, there is no time.

What does Sri Ramakrishna say? "Interpret time in terms of Eternity. Be filled with God-consciousness **both** in samadhi and in your work."

Does taking refuge in the Lord absolve us from all spiritual practice? No, it does not because the the spirit of self-surrender comes only after long and hard spiritual practice. There are signs of one who has true self-surrender: (1) There is no relish for worldly pleasures. (2) There is acceptance of whatever comes. (3) The person has undergone great spiritual disciplines and **knows** that human power is totally inadequate to realize God. His grace is necessary. No tinge of individuality can remain. A true Vedantin begins with self-effort and ends in self-surrender.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

**any cause but itself...** means no cause outside itself. When Brahman inhabits a body we call him Atman. Wherever there is life there is a soul, is the Hindu view; even in plants.

**Creative energy...** *maya sakti* or prakriti, according to Samkhya. Nature according to Vedanta includes everything that is **seen**: the *drsya*. There are two ways to end egotism: self-surrender and self-transcendence. Even if a priest comes to perform final unction, the soul may be thinking of all sorts of desires, wanting to come back to the world. The fate of the soul at death is not exactly an option; in fact, not at all. No thought can come to your mind if you have not thought it before. So think of God constantly. The thought of his pet deer came to King Jadabharata at the last moment and brought him back in that form! These are mythological stories.

(Question:) Why then are some born blind, poor, etc.? (Reply) This is difficult to answer.

The man who called his son, "Narayana!" at the last moment and went to heaven probably underwent a real conversion at that time. Great souls know when they are going and prepare for it.

Doubt is of two kinds—one, which is good, is the mother of science, Buddhism, and so forth. The other, spoken of in the Gita, is the negative sort, lack of *sraddha*, disbelief in spiritual possibility.

The Upanishads say that the soul does not leave this body until it has seized another, mentally. This is one theory; the other is that there is an interval in heaven and hell. The latter theory is the more accepted. All six systems of conventional Indian philosophy accept reincarnation.

Why not think of God only at the last moment? It may not be possible; at that time vitality is low, control may be weak. Death tears off our everyday masks. There was a sweeper (scavenger) who had the



vision of Sri Ramakrishna at his last moments and called for a seat for him—this happened partly through his grace. Every dying person sees the past of this life in a panoramic flash.

When Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) was to come to the Belur Math, preparations were made a month in advance! Thus should we be prepared for the coming of the Lord.

Sri Ramakrishna came to harmonize Sankara and Ramanuja. When we are persons, God too is a person; when we become impersonal, we will see God as Impersonal. The Personal may be *sakara*, with form, or just *saguna*, with qualities. *Sakara* may be an individual form. "I am Brahman" is true beyond the plane of the throat [referring to the upward rise of kundalini], where alone speech is still possible. So it must be felt more than spoken. Sri Ramakrishna said that if any of his words were false, all of them must be. He held strictly to truth. An incident is told of his nephew Ramlal's forgetting him in the pine-grove, where he went to answer the call of nature. He remained there helpless, simply because he had **said** that Ramlal would come to help him and bring him back. If the mind is truly pure, a thought in it is expressed in the body; so his body used to resist any wrong idea. Don't be sorry if you don't get samadhi right off—the body may drop off if the vessel is not strong enough to hold it!

There is the story of Swami Akhilananda and Dr. Einstein discussing Swami Brahmananda's book (*The Eternal Companion*). Einstein had borrowed it on the Swami's recommendation. Returning, he asked the Swami why Maharaj emphasized meditation so much. Swami Akhilananda, thinking the professor was unhappy about that, tried to mollify him by saying, "No, no, Maharaj believed in using all the yogas, in a balanced blend," etc. Einstein said: "Well, you will excuse me Swami, but I think he does emphasize meditation, and I think I know why. It is because we all know how to think; we all know how to love; we all know how to work; but to meditate we have to be taught how. In the West our natural inclination is to go

outside and work." At the time of realization our conceptions all become untrue, that is, in the light of greater truth. But until then, conceptions are necessary. Maharaj used to say that this business of God-realization should be achieved between the ages of 24 and 35.

What is the yoga spoken of here? For us it is all the yogas. If you speak of karma yoga, Swami Saradananda is a prime example. But at the end of his life, as he felt the call, he withdrew from all activities, and gave himself to three hours of meditation in the morning.

An intellectual grasp of the Truth without realization is like the professor who lectures magnificently on painting but whose productions on canvas are dull and uninteresting. But there should be intellectual grasp first.

Sankara says nirvikalpa samadhi must be attained several times in order for one to be established in it.

Although both Swami Brahmananda and Swami Saradananda (and others) felt that the Master was guiding their actions, still in any issue or disagreement all bowed to Maharaj as one whose guidance was truer because he was so much in the God-conscious state.

My view is that the *sushumna*, etc., are all metaphorical; this is not the orthodox view (which relates them to physical body structures). But by metaphorical I do not mean "unreal" or pure imagination; a yogi actually experiences these "lotuses" as more real than this world or the body.

*Krama-mukti, jivan-mukti, videha-mukti*: three kinds of freedom.

These are three stages in our realization of who/what the Incarnation is: appreciation of the human side, the personality; seeing him as the immanent principle (the universal form); the transcendental (all is Ramakrishna).

**To reach this goal...** (this is from *Kathopanishad*) they practice brahmacharya. This term occurs again and again in the Upanishads. The Hindu conceives of life as a pilgrimage. Disillusionment with the world **must** come. But there is a flank attack and a frontal one, the former being superior: that is to let impressions come from the outside but interpret them spiritually.

**Highest perfection...** It usually means freedom from rebirth. Then how can Swamiji, Maharaj and others be perfect? They came here out of freedom; not out of desire—bondage-producing desire. *Adhikarika purushas* are the messengers of God. Detachment does not mean indifference; though it is impersonal it is not negative.

In this loka, prana and akasa seem very different, but in Brahma-loka they are the same. To a person of realization, however, matter, energy and mind are all one.

Day and night for us are measured by the rising and setting of the sun; but the real **day** is a thousand ages of Brahma. The Personal god is the same personality, whatever his function. Destruction is involution, creation is evolution (of names and forms from a primal state of energy). Are all these things to be taken literally? They are said to be the mystical realizations of the *rishis*, but the important thing is the symbolized truth that the cause is transformed into the effect; the world and all its contents go from unmanifested to manifested and back—until the Truth is realized.

The sentence at the bottom of p. 99 could be a mantra, it is so important and significant (vs. 20-22). [“That highest state of being can only be achieved through devotion to Him in whom all creatures exist, and by whom this universe is pervaded.”]

The things of the world are short and fleeting, like the flying saucers. “Don’t seek Him, just see Him,” said Swamiji.

**Another existence...** This is the knowledge of Brahman. “Unmanifest” with respect to this means “unperceived by the senses.” Max Planck and others have now given serious consideration to non-

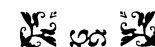
causality, what Gaudapada calls *ajatavada*. The greatest art is the art of living, of plumbing the secrets of life and death. We don’t want post-mortem felicity. The God in the speaker speaks to God in the listener: otherwise no conversation is possible.

p. 100... The knower of Brahman here means “knower-with-distinction” and Saguna Brahman. Swamiji’s interpretation of the “spheres” (*lokas*) is in terms of akasa and prana and in the differences between them: in the highest sphere they are almost the same; in this world, the solar, they are seen as different.

[A guest asked for commentary on Chap. V, vs. 8, which starts “The illumined soul... .” Swami said there is a possibility of return from Brahmaloaka (for *naisthika brahmacharis*, lifelong celibates, who may still have some desires).]

**Path of light:** path of Knowledge; **path of darkness:** path of ignorance. It can be interpreted in this way.

The mind is a rascal and cannot easily be conquered; if we are impatient we are done for! Our **general** miseries (not private frailties) **should** be shared with others, should be expressed; otherwise they become too burdensome.



## CHAPTER NINE

This chapter is one of the three most frequently recited publicly (along with the second and fifteenth).

**Accept Me...** Though from the highest standpoint all are One, yet we cannot say “we are all equal” as regards the guru. “The order of the guru must be obeyed without question.” Is it then blind obedience? A real guru will not want that. A teacher does, however, know

what way is best for the disciple to meditate.

**Do not question...** It does not mean taking everything for granted, blindly. The thinking, inquiring spirit must be there, or all initiative will be gone.

**Direct and instant...** This is the key to the chapter, its central message. The vision of God in meditation is better than the vision of God in dream.

**Eye of a mystic...** Has a mystic a different kind of eye from ours? No. His perspective is different. He sees without form, even when he sees form. One attitude is, "We are not ready; therefore we don't see him." But the positive attitude is, "This way of living (the monastic way) is as good as samadhi."

When we think of Sri Ramakrishna as an avatar we may ask, What did he mean in his reply to Swamiji's final question about it, on his deathbed, when he said, "but not in your Vedantic sense"? Two interpretations are possible. (a) We are all incarnations, but Self-forgotten, that is, "I am an incarnation but not in this sense." (b) As Sankara says, "An incarnation is relatively true—as real as the time-process; but not absolutely true, naturally."

A realized soul does not brood over the past nor build hopes on the future. He or she lives in the Eternal Now.

**Eternal form...** How can there be such a thing? It must be the "formless form." Cf. *Vivarta-vada*. All these theories are in the realm of discursive reason, intellectualism; God is to be discovered as a felt-awareness.

Here in the monastery we cannot show to others what the spirituality of this place is; there is nothing in the external to prove it. It is an intense spirit of renunciation. The question is often asked, What is the philosophy of the Ramakrishna Order? Is it Dualism, Qualified Non-dualism, Non-dualism or something else? We are all Advaitins, but ours is a comprehensive Advaita. All contradictions meet in spiritual experience. If Sri Ramakrishna has given us any

message at all, it is that we must **experience** something.

**No physical contact...** ordinary things are produced by contact with their maker; not so the universe. *Arambha-vada* is what we would call the idea that it has been created out of nothing, all of a sudden. *Parinama-vada* is evolution, but teleological, not just mechanical as is usual Darwinism. Among (religious) evolutionists there are two kinds: one answers the question, What is the purpose? by saying it is just play, no purpose. The other says it is to evolve better and better reflecting media.

*vivarta-vada*: the universe is apparently real. It is not the projection of **my** mind because we all corroborate a common experience, so it is not solipsism (Buddhist *vijnana-vada*). It is a projection of the Cosmic Mind. What we call the world, it says, is actually Brahman. *Vyavaharika satta*: the world is real so long as we are in it; but when we transcend relativity, our intellect, we see the really real. From experience we get detachment, from detachment, freedom. The "witness" attitude does not mean indifference; participate in all things, but see it all as fun.

**for maya is their master...** Some say that this maya theory was not in the Vedas (which are positive in their outlook), but came later with Sankara.

The maya theory is a kind of wise agnosticism: we do not know how the Absolute has become the relative. Happiness is a condition of the mind. Maya does not exist when we realize Brahman; until then it does. The whole universe is a reading of the Absolute; but Personal God is the highest reading of it, hence not a projection of the individual mind, nor a figment of the imagination.

"Tomorrow I will get it"—this is the attitude we need; *sraddha*. Here are two reasons why we should not be restless for sudden spiritual experience: (1) If we are not ready for it, getting it will make us unbalanced and (2) in order to enjoy it we must earn it. "The one who has *sraddha* gains Knowledge."

*Arundhati-nyaya* is the method of a good teacher. It will present to you contradictory statements, apparently, but if you are patient, the contraries will be resolved. All sentiency in nature derives from Brahman, not from prakriti itself, which is an instrument. *Mayavada* and *ajata-vada* are the same. The **fact** of creation cannot be denied, but the **act** of creation cannot be proved: this is the great paradox. When true spiritual illumination will come we will feel that all our troubles and struggles were foolishness, because we have always had what we are seeking. We will laugh. Until then we must continue in a sattvik mood—for six years, probably.

**Here in the human form...** Here is the theory of Divine Incarnation. Nowhere in the Upanishads do we find it; this is the first time. Incarnation is an act of grace—if you consider that God has created the universe by controlling maya, then can he not create a body for himself, take on a human form? If you do not believe in it, no one can convince you of it by argument, for it is a faith. The Incarnation is a manifestation of the Personal God and is as real as He; as the creation is an undeniable fact, so is the avatar a fact of history.

Coming to a monastery is laying the foundation; now the superstructure is to be built. Let us have a five-year plan [like the Soviets] to deepen our spiritual consciousness. His presence can be felt when the mind has become still and has given up all vain imaginings. We should not overwork, especially when there is a physical or mental strain. Balance is necessary.

**Of an unswerving mind...** We must detach ourselves from thoughts and moods. We blame the environment, but ninety percent of our trouble is from within. Symbols are of two sorts: name and form.

There are five great obstacles: *laya* (lethargy), *vikshepa* (distraction), *kashaya* (impurity), *rasasvadana* (clinging to sweetness) and *vyadhi* (illness).

**fiends and monsters...** The former are the cruel, the latter are the restless. We have thrown away these tendencies, keep only the sattvik ones.

**Praising my might...** includes singing about him.

**the virtue that wins me...** These are the four prerequisites of a student of Vedanta: awareness that the world is *anitya* (transient) and *asukha* (joyless); renunciation of possession and possessiveness; the six treasures (virtues); desire for liberation.

**Some see me...** Here are the two attitudes. But isn't the experience ineffable? Neither "one with" nor "separate from" properly describes it. Sri Ramakrishna has taught that the Absolute and the Relative are the two aspects of the one Sat-chit-ananda. To doubt is to think; to think is to exist. I am really the Real, but this must be realized. When it is realized, one becomes fearless; when one is fearless, then only can one work for others. Such a person has no false fear, no false expectation. Non-dualists see no distinction between one person and another. Sri Ramakrishna's is a synthetic philosophy, harmonizing all the views. As long as we **see** distinctions we have to observe them. But our real nature is that of a detached spectator—even though we are to participate in all our activities.

**mantram...** The word is said to stand for *mananam trayate*, salutation through reflection. We receive it from the guru and must make it *chaitanya*, alive. This is done by visualizing the *ista*.

Suppose we don't see God. A time will come when we will say, "I don't care; I have given my best; I have given my love, but I care for no return. I am not a beggar." Then you are established. That is highest love. Be a **giver, not a beggar**.

**I the oblation** (etc.)... This means we are to spiritualize all our activities. First we negate; after attainment of knowledge we affirm what we previously denied. Is there no difference between food and the eater? Yes, of course, from our standpoint, but not in *turiya*.. The test of experience is a complete change of life.

*Sastra, yukti, anubhava*: scripture, teacher's words, experience—there must be complete concordance among these three.

If our meditation is not good, not proper, our work also will not be. If it is right, we will not mind how much work we have to do.

**I am the sire of the world...** Father is efficient cause, personal God; mother is material cause, *maya*; grandsire here means *avyakta* or *avyakrita* (unmanifest) as well as the manifest.

Actions always have their effect; in the moral world this is called the law of karma. If it is inexorable, what place has grace? When grace comes, the law of karma is transcended: this is one view. Another view is that these effects will come, no doubt, but by his grace we will not be disturbed thereby.

Swamiji's temple at Belur Math contains (on the upper level) no image or picture—only an OM, which is considered the best symbol for meditation by the *Mandukya Upanishad*. Swamiji explains it as *sphota*. At one stage the ista merges into Om, Om into silence.

**I am the Vedas...** the essence of all the scriptures.

**end of the path** (*gati*)... He is also the value-giving factor.

**sustainer...** The name of the Lord is like food.

**place of abode...** The monastery is the monk's **nest**. In these early stages we think of a particular place as our home; the **pride of the monk** is good for progress; later we are to become universal—"the whole world is my home," we shall say.

There are the three *paramarthika* (having supreme reality) qualities of everything: *asti, bhāti, priya* (is-ness, cognizability and dearness) and two *vyavaharika* (relative, impermanent) qualities: name and form.

We must not think ourselves low. We should try to solve our own problems—but if a solution does not come, see your guru.

**I am the heat of the sun...** Here the immanence of God is spoken of. In Western philosophy it was called pantheism and was expounded by Spinoza. Sankara takes two points of view: first, God

is both the efficient and material cause of the universe, from the relative point of view; Brahman with *maya*, saguna Brahman. Then from the higher viewpoint, there has been no change at all in the Absolute.

There are said to be five obstacles to spiritual life: ignorance, attachment, hatred, egoism and clinging to life.

You can do japa, tapasya, etc.—but you **must** know how to die!

**righteous...** It means the pious, not the truly righteous. "Desireless" does not mean inert, unfeeling.

**yoga...** here means fulfillment of future needs, and *ksema* means preservation of what has already been gained. What are we to think, then, of famines and floods? True, but at such times the milk of human kindness also flows, in the form of relief, etc.

When Sri Ramakrishna got his throat cancer there were three options for him, theoretically. He could have practiced *hatha yoga*, with control of prana, etc., used the devotee's method of absolute faith (in God, in some technique, in fate, etc.) or he could apply to God in the form of the physician.

"Do not store up" we hear, but in practical life is it possible? There is also the consideration, "Do not tempt God; do not give him unnecessary trouble."

**devoting every moment to me...** This is the essential point. By worshiping minor deities we do not attain salvation. It comes only from the Supreme Lord. Going to God is nothing but a change of consciousness. It is a deep-felt awareness of Reality; it is when we seek to interpret this that all kinds of disagreements arise.

An aspiring soul will have a momentary glimpse, coming and going, whereas a realized soul has always the same consciousness. We have not done enough to find him. Our love is not one-pointed. One can **learn** to love. It is not like music; some may never be able to learn the latter, but devotion to God can be cultivated.

**Whatever man gives me...** This verse is the basis of our ritualistic worship. God does not actually (physically) eat the food. It is a symbol of our devotion.

**(vs. 28)...** The whole of the Gita says, “Keep **balance**; do not let yourself suffer from emotional disturbances.” We must react properly, not harbor negative thoughts in the mind. If there is an emotional joy in living this monastic life, then we are established. The law of karma **is** emotional disturbance. Have enthusiasm, drive, patience and a positive attitude. We should see our experiences objectively. A spiritual person knows **when** to become angry, **when** to become loving.

**My face is equal...** Then why are some so fortunate, for example, in realizing God? Because of their earnestness. We must come near to him. How the inner transformation from sinner to saint takes place in contact with a holy person is very difficult to explain. Look at Girish Chandra Ghosh, for instance. Do not condemn, for tomorrow his grace may “descend” and transform. Don’t think “I will repair the blemishes in myself and then I can be spiritual.” Think positively! If one loves God, blemishes will be erased automatically.

There is a theory that unless there is a consciousness of sin, there cannot be holiness. On the other hand, Freud’s theory is that one’s guilt-feeling is neurotic. The Vedantic idea is that sin is forgetfulness of God, our true nature. With Freud we agree that there is no sin in reality. If we suffer from sin it is not because of the will of an outside deity.

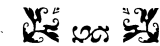
**rightly resolved...** This is when a sinner may be called holy. If the sinful person becomes holy, what happens to the law of karma? It is transcended by repentance and resolution. Sin and love of God **cannot** coexist. Forget the past; take care of the present, and the future will automatically be yours. [Swami said his own view is, don’t repent: just forget, and have positive thoughts.]

**He shall not perish...** a bold statement! In no sense does it mean

physical immortality. It means he will scoff at death. The Master spoke of the green and the ripe coconut, you recall—referring to the condition of the ego now, and when the aspirant is mature.

**Even... women...** This verse is often taken exception to. Is it narrow and dogmatic? Probably the intention is just the opposite—he is stating simply the fact of Indian social status, and pointing out its insignificance for spiritual life.

**you find yourself in this transient, joyless world...** This knowledge is absolutely essential to God-realization. Existentialism says that we are forced into a world totally unfavorable to our happiness and development. So kick it off! But the other side is the working of Divine Grace. Take refuge in him; then the vale of tears becomes a “mansion of mirth.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**You have dispelled my ignorance...** Not completely, or the poem would be all over, finished.

**lotus-eyed...** Why lotus? Because a person of mature, fully developed personality has wide open, mellow eyes, like a full-blown lotus.

Visions should always be tested. Here are some tests:

(1) Transformation of the personality. (2) The vision carries its own assurance with it. (3) A new fund of knowledge comes and problems are solved. Arjuna’s is a staggering vision; when this comes the most terrible thing loses its terror.

Question: Why didn’t the Master’s cousin, Haladhari, become changed after Mother Kali appeared to him? Sri Ramakrishna also blessed him by jumping on his back! Answer: Because he had not the power or fitness to receive that; there must be both the grace **and** the fitness.



This experience of the Universal Form is next to the highest of all; it is highest *savikalpa*, the experience of the immanence of God. Highest is the all-annihilating experience of *nirvikalpa*.

We must accept both the aspects which Arjuna saw, the sweet and the terrible. But if we see him all of a sudden, we will not be able to bear it, for we are to be prepared by spiritual disciplines.

Sri Krishna was in the God-conscious state when granting this vision, and says, "worship Me," speaking as the Supreme Spirit.

There are "inside" meditations and "outside" ones, but when God is actually experienced, this distinction is removed. In meditation we must become creative artists. Quality is what counts.

If one of us realizes God, he will not be able to enjoy it alone. In a very inexplicable way the rest of us will be benefited.

Why was Arjuna wonder-struck? Should one be afraid when seeing God? Not if one is prepared by training and predisposition. Sri Ramana Maharshi showed the equanimity of the triumph of soul over death. But he probably did not see the Universal Form; the devotee sees this. Even in the most despicable "sinners" the devotee sees the face of his ishta.

Why does a holy person suffer? The devotee will reply that if he is a guru he takes the karma of his disciples. A realized soul also suffers from headache, sleeplessness, etc., but he knows it is all happening to "somebody else."

**(p. 122)** This part is often chanted in the temples by those who are devotees of Sri Krishna. This is the form of Vishnu with four arms holding the mace, discus, conch and lotus. The two latter symbolize his gentle aspects (conch for *omkara*, lotus for love), the former are time rolling on (discus) and justice (mace).

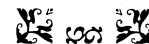
The body cannot live a single moment after the soul departs—this is the Hindu conception. Does this apply to all "life"? Jains, etc., will say yes; Hindus will agree but do not overstress the point.

When we want to be with the object of our love, serve him,

carry out his orders, etc., this is personal love. When we have constant remembrance even from afar, and serve him no matter where we are, this is impersonal love, true love. This is illustrated in the case of Holy Mother, who felt miserable when the Master passed away, but later realized his eternal presence. To be his Eternal Companion **you** must become eternal, since he is eternal.

If God is so terrifying, why do we want to see him? We have to take both, the gentle and the terrible. We must look on death and life with same-sightedness.

This chapter shows that Arjuna was not an advanced *sadhaka*; had he practiced sadhana for many years, the vision would not have troubled him. If our mind is pure and we see the Lord, we will find he is the embodiment of sweetness. First we see God is good, desirable; second, we accept both good and evil; third, we go beyond the pairs of opposites.



## PART THREE

From a Class on the First Four Verses of the *Brahma-sutras*

Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon, California, 1950

### Introduction

We find three famous interpretations of this basic Vedanta work, by Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva. We follow the viewpoint of Sankara, to whose *Puri* order we belong. Swami Suddhananda [Swami Vivekananda's disciple and a President of the Order] was once questioned by a monk of Varanasi about his *guru-parampara*, his lineage. He recited it without hesitation.

Fire as we know it does not know itself; as Brahman it knows itself: its existence is consciousness.

To "rational" people, illumined souls will appear irrational, but to **them** no one is irrational. The illumined soul will say, "Yes, from your standpoint..."

Don't be broken-hearted when your violin is broken!

Sankara says it is our "natural" procedure to superimpose.

A child touches fire, attracted by its charm, not knowing its nature, and is hurt and caught in it. We are like that, not knowing the nature of body, mind, etc. There was an old man, a gatherer and seller of firewood. One day he tried to bundle so much wood, in order to make

a single trip, that the burden was obviously too much for him. Exhausted and exasperated with his load in life, he repeatedly called the name of Yama, god of Death, to come and take him. Finally Yama arrived and asked what was wanted of him. Taken aback, the old man said, "Oh... I just would like you to help me get this load onto my shoulders!"

All the kinds of superimposition amount to this: the apparent presentation of the attributes of one thing on another thing.

The object depends for its **revelation** (not existence) upon the subject. [Swami Aseshananda emphasized this, repeating it frequently.] Atman is a non-object, not because it is non-existent or uncertain to exist, but because it is the eternal subject. But it is not an object of the ego-notion.

With respect to the mind, knowledge is a quality thereof; with respect to the Atman it is not.

Remember that all superimposition must be **on** something. It is presentation, through memory, of a wrong thing on a right thing. So ignorance is knowing a thing as it **appears** to be.

Transcendence of the mind is possible only through purity of the mind.

(Question from a class-member:) If all bodily functions are based on ignorance, how can the words of an illumined soul be true? Reply: His ignorance is no ignorance at all.

Sri Ramakrishna used to pun, saying, "You are born *manush* (human); but be *man hush* (awakened)."

This text is an inquiry into the nature of the Atman, or Brahman: "Sārīraka Mīmāṃsā."

**1. Then, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman. Then** (or now) means after passing the previous stage. After what? Sankara denies it is "after the study and performance of Vedic rituals." Rather, it means after the four-fold spiritual disciplines have been gone through. (Notice that Swamiji translates *samadhana* as self-surrender.)

Sankara's opponents were the ritualists; such opponents today might be the believers in Progress, etc.

The inquirer into Brahman need not be a householder: in fact he is more likely to be a monk. The study is subsidiary to the previous performance of rituals.

**Therefore** implies reason. "Desire to know Brahman" is for the purpose of knowing Brahman for Itself, not as subsidiary to some other end.

The opponent asks: Is Brahman known or unknown? If known, why inquire? If not known, it's a wild goose chase. (We must have some knowledge even to inquire, is one reply.) Sankara says: Brahman is known, on the grounds of its being the Self of everyone, and everyone feels that he exists: I-I-I. Now to different minds that I will be different. This conflict of opinions shows that we have only general knowledge, not specific knowledge.

A half-truth is as bad as a falsehood, in a pursuit of this kind.

Next are given the various views of Self, from the food-sheath up to the bliss-sheath.

The two schools of Mahayana Buddhism: *Yogacara* or *Vijnanavada*, that all is a stream of ideas; this self that I feel myself to be is just this momentary idea. Second, Sensation-ism and *Madhyamika* or *Sunyavada*, that all, or self, is **void**.

*Mīmāṃsakas* regard the soul as doer and enjoyer; it transmigrates. The Lord is not emphasized here.

*Samkhya* says the soul is the enjoyer only, not the agent. It enjoys by the **reflection** of nature on itself.

*Naiyayikas* say there is also a Supreme Lord, different from other souls.

*Yoga* teaches a God but he is not omniscient or omnipotent.

*Vedanta* the Lord is the Self of the enjoyer, whose individual existence is only apparent, the product of ignorance.

**2. Brahman is that from which the origin, etc.** (subsistence and dissolution) of the universe proceed. Here we are going gradually from lower to higher truth.

Scripture is cited here because the realizations of the seers are recorded therein.

The *Chhandogya Upanishad* says a person who has an illumined soul for teacher will realize God.

Brahman, not being an object of the senses, is not attainable by the other "right means of knowledge" (i.e., other than the *sruti*).

Scripture is an incentive to experimentation. If Brahman were a sense-object, we would clearly see that It is to the universe what fire is to smoke, i.e., cause to effect. But we don't, and are in doubt about the cause of the universe! Cause and effect apply to dual things.

**3. The omniscience of Brahman follows from Its being a source of scripture.** Scripture (*Vedas*) make men omniscient; therefore their Origin must be omniscient too. Or you can say, the

scriptures are the only **means** to true knowledge in the case of Brahman.

Vedic rituals can be of two kinds: actions (the rituals themselves) and the attendant *upasanas*, meditations.

**4. But this Brahman is to be known from scripture, because it is connected with the Vedantic texts as their purport** (meaning). It is like a word and its meaning. The Vedas are a reference book to Brahman.

[The brothers were not convinced that the above was not a circular argument, tending to make only those writings which are known as the Vedas the repository of access to the knowledge of Brahman. Swami Aseshanandaji consequently left this book and took up a different one.]