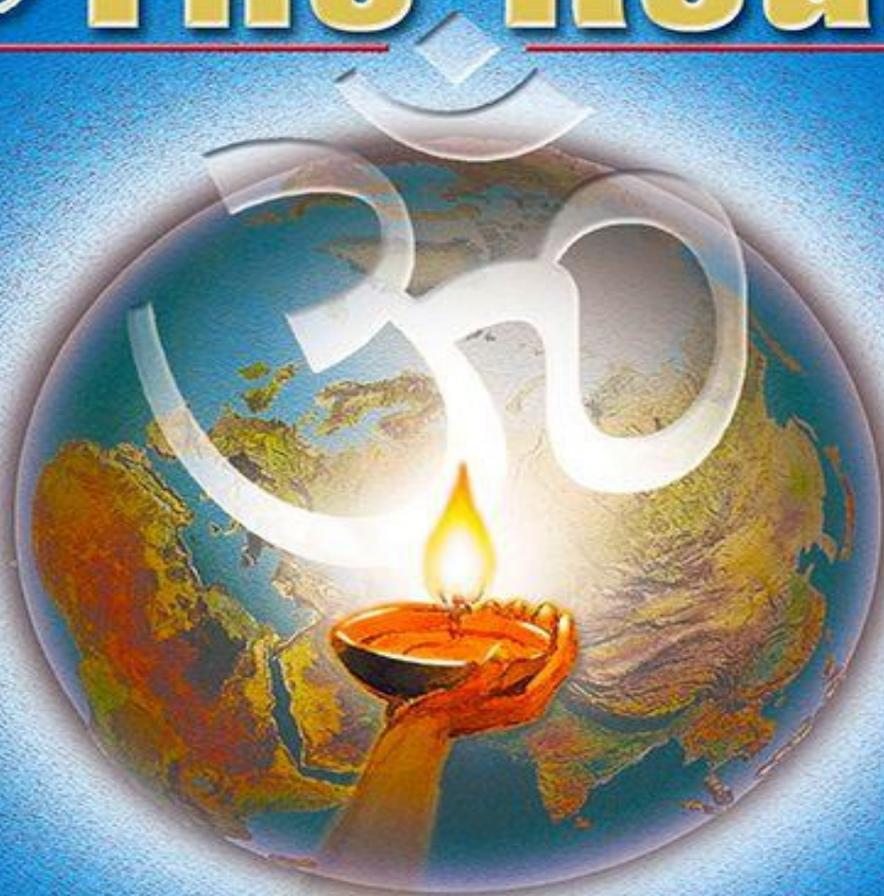


From
The Unreal
To **The Real**



SWAMI BHASHYANANDA

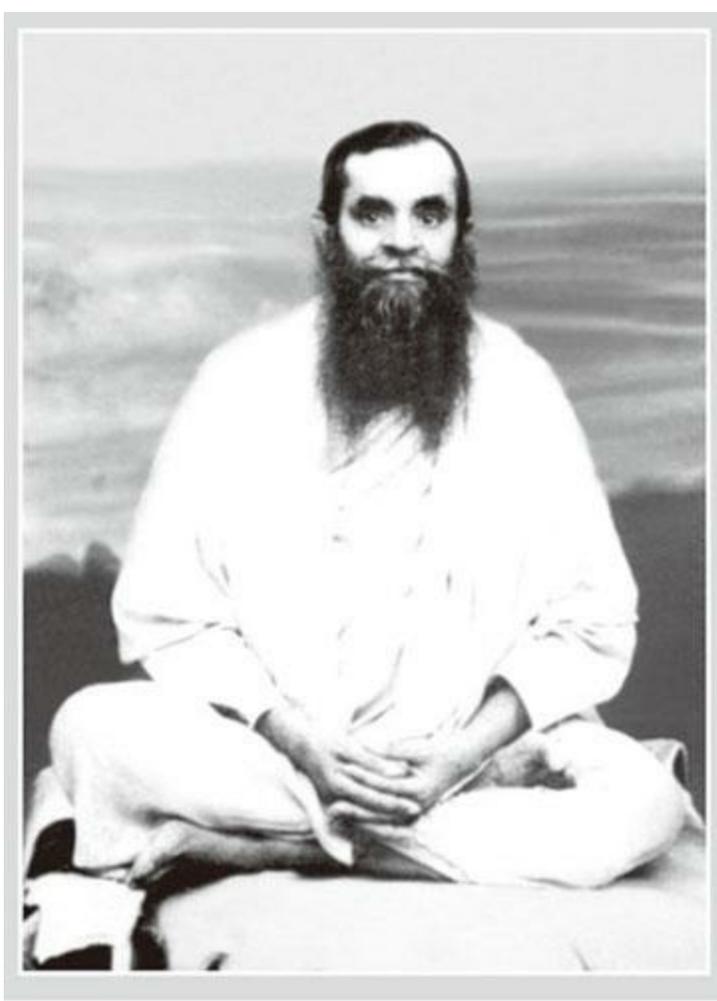
From
The Unreal
To **The Real**



SWAMI BHASHYANANDA



SRI RAMAKRISHNA MATH
Chennai-600 004. India



❖ SWAMI VIRAJANANDA ❖

—*Dedication*—

This Book is
dedicated with
all devotion and
reverence to the
sacred memory of
his holiness

SRIMAT SWAMI VIRAJANANDAJI MAHARAJ
6th president of the
Ramakrishna Math and Mission
from 1938 to 1951.

Publisher's Note

We are pleased to offer to our readers ‘FROM THE UNREAL TO THE REAL: SPIRITUALITY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE’; a compilation of Swami Bhashyananda's lectures, notes and classes spanning 20 years of teaching in the United States. The Swami spent many hours in the Vivekananda Vedanta Society both in Chicago and Ganges patiently organizing and reviewing the material for publication. Swami Varadananda then devoted many hours to editing, documenting and proofing the manuscript. Also Ms. Bobbie Roberts, Larry Janiak and Br. Jagannath worked together to present the finished copy to the Society's printer.

We wish to express our deep gratitude to the following people: First, Late Revered Swami Vyomarpuranda, president of the Ramakrishna Math at Nagpur, India, who succinctly capsulizes the broad subject of this book in his Foreword; and secondly, to Professor Sam Fohr, University of Pittsburg at Bradford, for his generous Introduction. We are indebted to all the people whose time and effort made this book possible.

This book was first published by the Vivekananda Vedanta Society, Chicago. We are happy that now the copy right has been transferred to Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai. We are publishing this book for the first time in India. We are grateful to Swami Chidananda, the head of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society, Chicago, for subsidising this edition.

We sincerely hope this book will be of benefit to all spiritual aspirants.

—Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.
March 2003

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Foreword

The Sages of the Upanishads always prayed to God—“Lead us from the Unreal to the Real”. The teachings of Vedanta show the path which takes man to the Real from the Unreal. Vedanta is not mere intellectual speculation, but it is a way of life. It is the flower of all Indian thought, culminating in the realisation of the Supreme Truth which has no geographical nor any kind of limitations. Vedanta is for all. It is the Universal Philosophy of life which helps man to manifest his inherent divinity. It is a science of self-evolution and self-perfection.

Vedanta points out the Oneness of existence and it calls upon man to realise this Oneness in this very life. Vedanta exhorts man to have a very broad outlook, for it teaches that different paths of spiritual practices ultimately lead him to the same Truth which is called by different names by different religions.

When man realises this Supreme Truth he reaches the state of perfection. “All doubts vanish forever, all selfish knots of the heart are cut asunder and the endless chain of cause and effect fades and dies for him who attains the Highest”. This is the state of perfection about which Jesus Christ speaks in his Sermon on the Mount—“Be thou perfect even as thy Father in Heaven is perfect.”

Vedanta is an applied science, a practical science. It helps man to build up his character, not only for his own good but for the welfare of mankind. A real Vedantin is an ideal servant of humanity, for he offers his service to men with the consciousness that they are veritable forms of God. His life is a blessing for all living beings, for service becomes his nature. It becomes part and parcel of his being. The life of such an ideal man is a living benediction to his fellow beings, for he follows the path of complete selflessness, consecration and love, and becomes a force to promote peace and happiness for all. Sri Krishna, Christ, Buddha and Sri Ramakrishna belong to the category of such ideal Vedantins and their lives illustrate Vedanta in theory and practice. They are the embodiments of the spirit of Vedanta.

Swami Bhashyananda has explained different aspects of Vedanta philosophy in this book with appropriate quotations from the Upanishads and the Gita and has brought home to us the significance of this great philosophy in the context of the present situation in the world. From this standpoint this book will serve a very useful purpose by making readers aware of their duty to themselves and to the world at large.

Swami Vyomarpuranda

Nagpur
Oct. 3, 1985

Introduction

The different spiritual traditions in the world should not be viewed as competitive but rather as complementary. They are like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. All are needed to complete the spiritual picture. That is to say, each tradition has something special to contribute to our knowledge of God. We observe something similar in nature. Each species, no matter how we may feel about it, contributes something to the ecological balance of the physical world. Further, each species has some special virtue or feature, something it can do better than any other species or even something only it can do. Thus, every species has something to teach us about the world.

What holds true among the various spiritual traditions throughout the world also holds true within these traditions. There have been many worthy spiritual guides in Hinduism and there is no reason to venerate one at the expense of another. Each knowledgeable individual has had something unique to contribute through his speech and, in some cases, his writing. By expressing the primordial truths in his own way, he has afforded many people the chance to grow spiritually where this might not have been possible otherwise.

Such a true spiritual guide was the saintly Sri Rama-krishna whose unique message was the one with which we began this introduction: that all spiritual traditions are merely different vehicles for attaining God. Sri Ramakrishna not only taught this as a theory but also put it into practice in his life by worshipping in the ways of many traditions and reaching God through all of them (as we read in Part IV of this book). Sri Ramakrishna's message has had some effect, as people in the Twentieth Century seem to be more ready to accept spiritual traditions other than their own than people were in the Nineteenth Century. But, regretfully, we must say that a great deal of "spiritual chauvinism" still exists.

Swami Bhashyananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, has also stressed particular facets of the spiritual life in his teachings. And through his careful and insightful explanations and his illuminating analogies and stories he has brought spiritual knowledge and solace to many people. We can gain an appreciation of his unique gifts by reading the opening pages of the very first selection of *From The Unreal To The Real*. In that essay, titled "The Essentials of Religion," he discusses the various vehicles for the attainment of God with respect to their admixture of human and divine elements. He points out how the human element often hides the divine, and must ultimately be transcended, but is still necessary as a support of the divine, helping people toward realization. Many of his essays stress the positive aspects of things that people tend to write off as unnecessary or harmful in the spiritual life. For instance, in "Universal Elements in Hinduism" he stresses the need for religious practice along with pure philosophy, for emotion along with reason; in "Steps to Spiritual Fulfilment" he shows how ritual can be a first step toward illumination; and in "Outline of the Hindu Religion and Philosophy" he indicates that dualism, qualified non-dualism and non-dualism are not really contradictory but represent stages on the spiritual path. Throughout the selections he invariably selects those passages from ancient texts and from the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna that best illumine

the points he is making. Further, like Sri Ramakrishna, he stresses the practical side of the spiritual quest along with the theory. Indeed, his well-known stress on balance in our lives is amply illustrated by the fact that his essays on theory always give us a dose of practical advice while his essays on practice always include some theory.

It may be thought by some that theory is not very important, that what is needed is a set of instructions for spiritual attainment. While this may work in the case of a small minority of aspirants, it will not work for the vast majority. It is important for those on the spiritual path to have at least an idea of the Ultimate Reality they are seeking to realize and of the relationship of this Reality to the cosmos and themselves. Without such an idea the aspirant may overlook the central and significant, and overvalue the peripheral and insignificant. Yes, there are well-known stories indicating that blind faith in a spiritual master can lead to great strides, but there are also well-known stories to the effect that imitating a master without knowing why he does what he does can lead to useless activity.

Of course, all theory and no practice will not yield spiritual results for the vast majority of aspirants. It would be nice if hearing the truth would immediately turn us into spiritually enlightened beings, but such is not the case except for a chosen few. Unfortunately, we live at a time and in conditions which keep us in a state of mind inimical to grasping the highest truths, even after we have heard them expounded. Spiritual practice is really a way of counteracting these negative influences and bringing us to a state in which we can absorb these truths, i.e., make them our own. Thus, in the Kali Yuga, we must face the disagreeable prospect that what may have come easier to people in earlier ages will come to us only with great efforts. However, the rewards of such efforts, as Swami Bhashyananda tells us, are immense, while the consequences of not making such efforts, as the Swami shows conclusively, are dire indeed.

It would take too long to mention all the high points among the various essays contained in this book. Besides, different people would show different degrees of appreciation for them, depending on their present spiritual state and knowledge. But we can say that scattered throughout the essays are gems of insight and memorable analogies which are bound to help any aspirant go further along the spiritual path. And when a topic is taken up in more than one selection, new light is shed on it each time. We were particularly struck by a passage in "Life's Goals and Their Fulfilment According to Hinduism." It reads, "The solution for all human problems lies in the relationship between unity and diversity. We must draw our lessons from the Divine Pattern in nature. There is harmony but not rigid uniformity. No two leaves on a tree are identical. Side by side, two snowflakes are similar yet completely different. No two fingers are equal in all respects." He goes on to say that unity should not be sought in outer uniformity but rather in what is deep within all beings. Is it not sad that in the modern age we do not "draw our lessons from the Divine Pattern in nature"? In opposition to the model God has given us we have embarked on efforts to make everyone think and act alike, and have instituted mass-production as the procedure for making everything. Our aim seems to be to turn out mechanically the greatest number of identical products. On a more general level we cite "The Philosophy and Discipline of Seeing God Everywhere" as worthy of special mention, even considering the general excellence of Part III. Also impressive are the essay on Kurukshetra, which is both informative and uplifting, and the essay on Buddhism which shows how essentially Buddhism is not opposed to Hinduism.

In concluding this Introduction we must say it is ironic that the term "religion" derives from a Latin

word meaning to bind. Regretfully, religions have tended to divide people into opposing groups. Like Sri Ramakrishna before him, Swami Bhashyananda has devoted himself to reversing this process, and this is well-illustrated by the selections in *From The Unreal To The Real* , especially the essay titled “Sri Ramakrishna, the Ideal of a Universal Religion.” We hope that readers will take to heart the valuable lessons contained herein.

Sam Fohr

The Essentials of Religion

Religion is both a divine and a human institution. The divine aspect of religion is one, as God is one. In its ideal aspect, there are no differentiations or divisions. That is the essence of pure religion where there is complete harmony. However, when we come to the human aspect of this institution, then we are faced with the fact that the essentials and the non-essentials appear mixed together. This mixture is so perfect that we see only the non-essentials, with the essentials hidden behind. In actuality, the goal is the attainment of perfection, peace and highest Knowledge.

On the human level, there is no such thing as a purely spiritual religion. We cannot mold ornaments from pure gold without an alloy. Similarly, a purely spiritual religion cannot be demonstrated; still, the alloy, the non-essentials consisting of injunctions and prohibitions, while useful and necessary, is transcended in the end.

Religion can be compared to a river. The waters of the river are pure and crystal clear at the source. As you travel down along the banks, you see the water getting muddy. Similarly, religion is pure in its essence and origin, as it comes from the Supreme Reality Itself through the medium of incarnations and god-men. To know this is the highest, transcendental experience, going beyond all limitations of word and thought. But when this thought is carried to individuals or groups, it is influenced by the character and characteristics of the people. We see these facts illustrated in all the major religions of the world. In Hinduism, for example, the original thought of God or the Ultimate Reality is clothed in silence first (the undifferentiated OM), and then through three words—Existence, Knowledge, Bliss (Sat-Chit-Ananda). But as we go further, we find multifarious expressions at various levels, some of them seemingly contradictory, and the pure spirit at the origin is almost lost.

In Christianity, for example, the teaching of Christ and His Apostles represents the highest Truth. There is no dogma, creed, or ritual. But when we come to St. Paul and later theologians, who were influenced by the political philosophies of Greece and Rome, we see the doctrines of the church being organized, needing followers, and emphasizing the concepts of heaven and hell, reward and punishment, etc. The teachings of Christ developed in Southern Europe through mysticism, in Northern Europe through moral law, and in America through the practical approach.

So is the case with other major religions. Even the purest truth gets distorted when organized, for it has to cater to the needs of the followers. Does that mean that the Churches are unnecessary, therefore? Mustafa Kamal in Turkey and Lenin in Russia ordered that all churches be destroyed, because according to them no church was necessary for human development, and we know from history that was a dark age for humanity. In contrast, Hindu spiritual thinkers, throughout the history of India, have emphasized that temples and places of worship are most necessary for beginners. For the advanced, the meaning of churches and temples changes. For them, God is not enclosed only in a particular spot or building, like a temple or church, because they see the presence of God

everywhere, including within themselves.

To an enlightened person all the Vedas are as useful as a tank when there is a flood everywhere.¹

When the southern breeze blows, all become cooled, and there is no necessity of a fan.

Thus, we see that religion has two elements—essential and non-essential—like grain and its husk. We sow the grain as seed and when it is fully developed, the husk drops off. Until then, it protects the grain. Similarly, the non-essentials of religion, consisting of rituals, myths, ceremonies, and the essentials, such as purity, unselfishness, renunciation, love, and reverence, are all necessary in order to protect the natural, inner love and to allow the mystical experience to grow and manifest. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that one should not forcibly tear off the scab from a wound because it may become abscessed. The scab falls off by itself when the wound is healed. By clinging to the non-essentials, religion often becomes cold intellectualism, for it lacks the warmth and feeling which come from the inner truth. Still, rituals and ceremonies, though non-essential, are not unnecessary. They are our support. They keep us away from mental depression, negative thoughts and negative ideas. Many individuals are babies, as far as religious experience is concerned, in spite of secular learning and position in life. For one example, think of how the use of mythological stories has enriched human culture, though the stories are non-essential once the goal is reached. The art of Michaelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, the magnificent cathedrals of Western Europe, the caves of Ajanta-Ellora, or the intricately carved temples of South India have all been created from the inspiration of the vast store of mythology existent in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The greatest of prophets and saints have emerged from religions rich in rituals and mythologies.

The real danger comes when the non-essentials swallow the essentials of religion. That is exactly what has happened since the time of the Renaissance in Europe. New values emerged, based on the experience of the sensate world. These values gave a hard blow to faith, which always has as its basis a simple and truthful life. In this present age of materialism, Sri Ramakrishna illustrated in human form the distinction between the essentials and the non-essentials of religion. God manifested Himself in the form of Sri Ramakrishna in order to teach that through spiritual practices, the spiritual aspirant can see God both within and without. Through the wonderful words enshrined in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and *The Great Master*, we see these ideas expressed again and again. The nonessentials are a part of the way to realize God everywhere—within and without. They can transform man's outlook. There is, for example, the story of the man who disguised himself as Siva and visited a house:

An actor disguised himself as Siva and visited a house. The master of the house wanted to give him a rupee, but he did not accept it. Then the mendicant went home, removed his disguise, came back to the gentleman, and asked for the rupee. 'Why didn't you accept it before?' he was asked. He said, 'I was impersonating Siva,

a sanniyasi. I couldn't touch money at that time.'²

Another story shows how the non-essentials may be utilized to reach the goal, but once there, the lower forms will drop off.

Suppose a man has a thorn in the sole of his foot. He gets another thorn and takes out the first one. In other words, he removes the thorn of ajnana, ignorance, by means of the thorn of Jnana, knowledge. But on attaining vijnana, he discards both thorns, knowledge and ignorance. Then he talks intimately with God day and night. It is no mere vision of God.³

By following philosophy, mythology, and necessary rituals in the beginning, not only can man's outlook be transformed, but he can also arrive at the fullest realization of the goal that God is real and the world illusory.

One night a fisherman went into a garden and cast his net into the lake in order to steal some fish. The owner heard him and surrounded him with his servants. They brought lighted torches and began to search for him. In the meantime the fisherman smeared his body with ashes and sat under a tree, pretending to be a holy man. The owner and his men searched a great deal but could not find the thief. All they saw was a holy man, covered with ashes, meditating under a tree. The next day the news spread in the neighborhood that a great sage was staying in the garden. People gathered there and saluted him with offerings of fruit, flowers, and sweets. Many also offered silver and copper coins. 'How strange!' thought the fisherman. 'I am not a genuine holy man, and still people show such devotion to me. I shall certainly realize God if I become a true sadhu. There is no doubt about

it.' If a mere pretence of religious life can bring such spiritual awakening you can imagine the effect of real sadhana. In that state you will surely realize what is real and what is unreal. God alone is real, and the world is illusory.⁴

Swami Vivekananda found Sri Ramakrishna's ideal of service to living beings (Jivas) as God (Siva) based on the same wonderful ideal.

But from what the Master in ecstasy said today, it is gathered that the Vedanta of the forest can be brought to human habitation and that it can be applied in practice to the work-a-day world. Let man do everything he is doing; there is no harm in that; it is sufficient for him, first, to be fully convinced that it is God who is manifested before him as the universe and all the beings in it. Those with whom he comes in contact every moment of his life, whom he loves, respects, and honours, and to whom his sympathy and kindness flow, are all His parts, are all He Himself. If he can thus look upon all the persons of the world as Siva, how can there be an occasion for him to regard himself as superior to them or cherish anger and hatred for them or an arrogant attitude to them, or even to be kind to them? Thus serving the jivas as Siva, he will have his heart purified and be convinced in a short time that he himself is also a part of God, the Bliss Absolute, the eternally pure, wakeful and free Being.⁵

There have been attempts to formulate religions which claim only the essentials as their basis. But this is not possible on the psychophysical plane, where almost the whole of humanity lives. Religion becomes eclectic and intellectual, at best. Such attempts have failed miserably in the past, looking outwardly like a beautiful bouquet of flowers harmoniously arranged, but inside completely different. The attempts have ended with one religion ultimately trying to overpower the others, being beset with

hatred and smugness.

Man cannot live for long only on concentrated vitamin pills. The vitamins are supplements to various types of food and drink, which also contain vitamins. Similarly, the pure concept of religion, with its essentials organized, still does not make a practical approach to harmony and unity unless a variety of forms of worship are admitted, with unity in the background. Thus, a commingling of the essentials and non-essentials, the latter forming the means and the former the goal, is what can really bring the harmony of religions.

Let us find out some of the essentials of religion. To begin with, we must get rid of nature's control over us and feel completely free from its clutches on the psychophysical plane. This can be achieved through knowledge, emotion, and work. The desire to go beyond the limitations of nature has been expressed with great vitality through mythology, religious ceremonies and rituals, images, and symbols. Even the worship of ghosts, demons, and snakes falls into this category, although the religious impulse to be free is most traditionally associated with the worship of God's Incarnations and their teachings.

We are always victims of two kinds of nature—external and internal. The external nature can be brought under control with the help of science, but the internal nature must be brought under control by our self-efforts. The partial, and later on, full control of the internal nature forms a very important factor in religion. We are all born in Maya. Ignorance surrounds us. Contradictions face us on all sides. There are contradictions between knowledge, thought, and action. Man aspires to know everything—the secrets of the heavenly bodies and the subtle forces controlling them. Yet at every step he encounters obstacles. Man wants to be charitable by introducing philanthropic works. Still human misery perpetuates itself. The forces of affection and love play through us. We find them resulting in attachments and entanglements. In such circumstances, we can only ask the question, “What is the way out?” And the answers are provided:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and
are heavy laden, and I will give you
rest.⁶

Renounce all dharmas and take refuge
in Me alone. I shall liberate you
from all sins; grieve not.⁷

Verily, this divine illusion of mine,
made up of the gunas, is hard to
surmount; but those who take refuge
in Me alone, they cross over this
illusion.⁸

Going beyond Maya—ignorance and the bondage of limitations—is the most essential requirement in religion.

Renunciation is the essential condition of progress. The desire for enjoyments during youth has to be channeled, controlled and converted into maturity and wisdom. The outgoing nature *pravritti* will

have to expend its force and begin turning inwards. Man will then find new meaning and depth of experience.

The self-existent Lord pierced the senses outward. Therefore one sees the outer things and not the inner Self. A rare discriminating man, desiring immortality, turns his eyes away and then sees the indwelling Self.

The unintelligent people follow the external desires. They get entangled in the snares of the widespread death. Therefore the discriminating people, having known what true immortality is in the midst of impermanent things, do not pray for anything here.⁹

The means for the attainment of the other world does not become revealed for the non-discriminating man who blunders, being befooled by the lure of wealth. One that constantly thinks that there is only this world, and none hereafter, comes under my (Death's) sway again and again.¹⁰

The outgoing nature shows itself in the quest for external achievements. Its counterpart—*nivritti*—represents another part of the mind, the nature which does not want to wander out and thus says: “No, do not go out, stay within, for the kingdom of heaven is within you. Sense pleasures bring weariness. Think of yourself fifty years from now.” Experience of this force of *nivritti* is the beginning of religion. Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the homa bird exemplifies the principle:

There is a class of devotees, the *nityasiddhas*, the ever-perfect. From their very birth they seek God. They do not enjoy anything of the world. The Vedas speak of the homa bird. It lives very high in the sky. There the mother bird lays her egg. She lives so high that the egg falls for many days. While falling it is hatched. The chick continues to fall. That also goes on for many days. In the meantime the chick develops eyes. Coming near the earth, it becomes

conscious of the world. It realizes it will meet certain death if it hits the ground. Then it gives a shrill cry and shoots up toward its mother. The earth means death, and it frightens the young bird; it then seeks its mother. She dwells high up in the sky, and the young bird shoots straight up in that direction. It doesn't look anywhere else.¹¹

A tremendous dissatisfaction is felt, even with the highest achievements in the world.

Dispassion towards the objects of the senses, and also absence of egoism; perception of evil in birth, death, old age, sickness, and pain—this is declared to be Knowledge.¹²

Without renunciation, there is no real religion, no moral perfection. We cling to life, but discover that this life is death. Death is the self-same truth, viewed from another angle.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.¹³

Through the experience of renunciation, man's discrimination begins to dawn. He begins to question, "What shall I do to inherit life eternal?" "Take up thy cross and follow me"¹⁴ is the reply. Here, all religions agree.

Purity is another essential of religious experience. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."¹⁵ The mind consists of three gunas or qualities: sattwa, rajas, and tamas. Tamas and rajas are the constituents of an impure mind. Their attributes are cruelty, violence, inertia, greed, passion, lust, egotism, etc. Sattwa, on the other hand, manifests purity. Through this attribute, we can see the Divine within ourselves. It brings transparency and clearness in our vision, also peace and joy. Purity of mind has the strength necessary to keep rajas and tamas under control. The mind becomes crystal clear and brightly reflects God's Light, untouched by sinful thoughts or objects. Such purity becomes a redemptive power—the essential strength shown by all the prophets. Christ redeemed Mary Magdalene by this power.

Even if a man of the most sinful conduct worships Me with undeviating devotion, he must be reckoned as righteous, for he has rightly resolved.¹⁶

On this point also, all religions agree.

Reverence is a third essential of religion. It is of two types—positive and negative. The positive type is based on conviction—*astikyā buddhi*. It is a cardinal virtue: the conviction that a positive Reality exists in this universe, within man and without, where every act and thought is based on Truth. Finding that Truth is man's “rebirth” into religious life. Reverence should not be negative; God should not be respected because of fear of punishment. Likewise, a student of religion should make his inquiries not with scornful or critical intentions but with devotion and a deep desire to know the Truth. Ekalavya had such a deep respect and devotion for his teacher, Drona, that although he could not study directly with him, still he worshipped an earthen image of the teacher and thereby acquired the needed proficiency.

Love is the whole of religion.

That self-creator is verily the source of joy; for one becomes blissful by coming in contact with that source of joy.¹⁷

God is a magnet. He attracts everyone who attains purity of heart and devotion.

I am the same to all beings; to Me there is none hateful, none dear. But those who worship Me with devotion, they are in Me and I also am in them.¹⁸

Love shows no fear or expectation of return but is its own ideal. This is the basic tenet of all religions. Although all religions contain both essentials and non-essentials, the spiritual seeker must be prepared to separate them from one another by discrimination and the spiritual disciplines mentioned above. Thus, slowly and steadily, he will come to the knowledge of God which is the aim of religion. This knowledge is what changes the character of the seeker. It is the final experience, the summum bonum of human life. Man's baser nature is purified and changed to gold. This goal has been taught by all Incarnations and prophets for all eternity.

God : Personal and Impersonal

Human beings who have reached the state of self-conscious awareness and who work on that level can be more or less divided into two groups: those who believe in God and those who do not. We are here concerned with those who believe in God. In our usual conversations with people who believe in God, we generally get discussion pinned down to the Personal God and the Impersonal God, God with form and God without form. It happens to be a vital question in the practice of religion, particularly in the practice of meditation. Arjuna, as a seeker of truth in the Bhagavad Gita, had a dilemma as to which aspect of God he should worship and meditate on so that he could realize His nature.

Between those devotees who worship You
being thus ever devoted, and those who
worship the Imperishable, the Unmanifest,
who are better versed in yoga?¹

The answer was provided by Sri Krishna in the twelfth chapter, verse 5:

Greater is their difficulty whose minds
are set on the Unmanifested, for the
goal of the Unmanifested is very hard
for the embodied to reach.²

According to Sri Krishna, there are two types of worshippers. One type is the worshipper of the Personal God. We are His instruments, we surrender to Him, love Him with all our heart and soul, take refuge and shelter in Him, and we carry out His commands. The other kind worships the Impersonal, Unmanifest, Infinite, Indescribable, Nameless and Formless Consciousness. We commune with Him through meditation and attunement. Which of the two is superior? This natural question comes to our mind just as it did to Arjuna's. Sri Krishna replied to this question of Arjuna's by saying that worship of the Personal and meditation on the Impersonal are two paths leading to the same goal, which is Godhead. Both lead to the same goal, but the seekers of God follow either path according to their spiritual growth and constitution. For the majority, the path of devotion is easier.

Those who have fixed their minds on Me
and who ever steadfast and endowed with
supreme faith, worship Me—they do I
consider perfect in yoga.³

Sri Krishna exhorts Arjuna to worship the Personal God. In the Personal aspect, God is perceived to

be like a person. This is easier for the human mind to understand.

If, for instance, the buffaloes want to worship God, they will, in keeping with their own nature, see Him as a huge buffalo; if a fish wants to worship God, it will have to form an idea of Him as a big fish; and man has to think of Him as man.⁴

Similarly, when a human being thinks of God, he thinks of Him as a big, unlimited man, with unlimited power and capacity, with human attributes; the cause of the whole universe, the creator and preserver, endowed with knowledge and power, compassion and love. The Personal God need not have a definite form like a long beard or a tall figure. Still, He can be worshipped with form. His hands are everywhere, His faces everywhere, His bodies are everywhere. It is like pointing to the moon with a finger, where one uses the finger to gather attention and indicate the direction to the moon. God is the Father, He is the Mother, He is the Preserver, Protector, and so on. But none of these are the ultimate nature of the Personal God. These forms and qualities bring to our mind the concepts and feelings behind them. Our sense organs and the mind coordinating them become satisfied with these forms.

He who is formless is also endowed with form. To His bhaktas He reveals Himself as having a form. It is like a great ocean, an infinite expanse of water, without any trace of shore. Here and there some of the water has been frozen. Intense cold has turned it into ice. Just so, under the cooling influence, so to speak, of the bhakta's love, the Infinite appears to take a form. Again, the ice melts when the sun rises; it becomes water as before. Just so, one who follows the path of knowledge—the path of discrimination—does not see the form of God any more. To him everything is formless. The ice melts into formless water with the rise of the Sun of Knowledge. But mark this: form and formlessness belong to one and the same Reality.⁵

What is the true nature of God then? It boils down to this: His real nature cannot be described by words or understood by mind. Words have been created to describe only the material aspect of manifestation, and the senses perceive them in their objective form. Godhead is not an object.

(He is) that from which words turn back
along with the mind.⁶

What Brahman is cannot be described in
words. Everything has been polluted,
like food that has touched the tongue—
that is, everything has been described
in words. But no one has been able to
describe Brahman.⁷

The eye does not go there, nor speech, nor mind.⁸

It is known to him to whom It is unknown,
he does not know to whom It is known. It
is unknown to those who know well,
and known to those who do not know.⁹

Dear boy, you shine like a knower of Brahman.¹⁰

Meister Eckhart said, “We should learn not to give any name to God, lest we imagine that in so doing we have praised and exalted him as we should; for God is above names and ineffable.”¹¹ The Upanishads say, “Neti, neti— not this, not this.”¹² How can we contemplate the impersonal aspect of God? It requires complete detachment from the world and the body, and freedom from love and emotion. One has to realize that the world is completely illusory and be free from the least ego, passion, and feelings.

Most seekers are incapable of concentration on the Impersonal aspect of God. Naturally, they all speak of a Personal God, such as Father, Mother, Lover, Friend, Companion, Master, or Refuge. These two aspects, the Personal and the Impersonal, are not contradictory, but are completely separate from each other. They are like two streams, one carrying water and the other moving ice. God, Himself, assumes different forms. Ice is a consolidated form of water. These are not human imaginings. The eternal Absolute assumes forms like the sun, moon, and other objects. The Godhead seen through the veil of Maya, or limitations, assumes names and forms and is true in the relative world. When Maya disappears, forms of God also disappear into the Formless. The Absolute does not change, either with or without attributes, clothed or naked, with names or without names. Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, and Bliss Absolute remain constant.

Sri Ramakrishna described the Impersonal and the Personal as Brahman and his power, Shakti, according to its two modes of manifestation. When inactive, neither creating nor preserving, it is known as Brahman, the Absolute. When active, the same Absolute is called Shakti or Power or Kali. They are not different; they are like fire and its power to burn. Sri Ramakrishna expressed this by saying, “The snake is a snake whether it is coiled up motionless or wriggles along.”¹³ When we think, describe, see, or worship, It is called Shakti, the Personal God. When thought stops in deepest meditation, It is realized as Brahman, the Absolute, without names and forms. Through the power of the devotee's love, the Godhead assumes a form. When the devotee meditates, the form melts into the

formless. The idea of a Personal God is inevitable as long as we think of God through our mind. Our mind is not free from personality. We can think of God only through the personal attributes. An object, whatever its nature is, plus our mind, is what we know. The thing, itself, remains unknown to us so long as we have our body and mind. When the mind is transcended, we merge into the reality and only the Absolute remains. That Absolute cannot be described in words or conceived of through the mind, because mind does not exist at that level. Who will describe that Absolute and to whom? But once human nature, called the body consciousness, stops thinking, we can transcend it. There alone God is known as He really is. This is not the usual subject-object knowledge by which we know an object, but it is knowledge itself. A Personal God is inevitable as long as we have a body and are attached to it, have senses and perceive the world through them, and have ego and think of ourselves as the doer and enjoyer. So long as we think of ourselves as individuals, we remain dualists; and so long the subject-object world is a reality to us.

But the Personal God cannot be the ultimate concept of reality. God is the universal principle in and through which everything is explained.

(Which is that thing) which having been known,
all this becomes known?¹⁴

That one unity reconciles all differences and distinctions. All frictions cease and there dawns complete understanding and peace. It is in this unity that every individual finds the meaning for which they are searching. The Personal God cannot satisfy all the conditions because He is still a particular amidst the universal. Who is the one responsible for the evil, suffering, and inequality which we see in the world of duality? So long as this duality remains, so long these problems will remain. This world of duality has not been able to wipe out these problems at any time in the past, in the present, nor will it in the future. They can all be overcome as soon as unity is realized behind the duality.

Duality ceases to exist after realization.¹⁵

If the Impersonal is the highest reality, what about the Personal God? Does He lose His importance? Is He weakened, or does He become a common property like an ordinary object? No, that is not the case. He is rather strengthened by the Impersonal Spirit, which is the reality behind Him. The Personal God is the highest manifestation of the Absolute in the relative world. He is the nearest concept of the Absolute that can be grasped by the human mind. The Absolute manifests Itself through a variety of names and forms and looks different, like photographs of the sun taken with the same camera by the same person from different altitudes. The same Absolute appears as sun, moon, trees, plants, angels, man, animal, the five elements, etc. These are channels and molds through which one spirit passes, as it were. They show the Absolute according to their transparency. The Personal God is the best manifestation of the Impersonal. He will always receive our worship and adoration. A clear understanding of the concept of the Personal God will remove man's fanaticism, which is the ground for quarrels. The Rg Veda proclaims that "The truth is one; sages call it by various names."¹⁶

Apparent and Real Man

All the religions of the world have sung the glories of man. His excellences, his achievements, and his potential capabilities are expressed in poetry and prose. Vedanta also speaks of the potential abilities of man and stresses the fact that since God dwells as the innermost spirit of the human being, man can realize his identity with God and attain Mukti or freedom in this very life.

Modern science, although it extols the capacities of man, does not give him any value as far as spirit is concerned. Some astronomers call him an insect crawling on the twisted surface of a burned-out star. Chemistry calls him a being worth only 93 cents. This view that man is only a bunch of dust is not accepted by deep thinkers. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in “A Psalm of Life” stresses this point, that the real value of man is not the physical being but the eternal existence. “Dust thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul.”¹ The material man spoken of by science or the psychological man exposed by psychiatrists is not the whole man. The material man is only a fraction, the surface reading of man, like the tip of an iceberg. The real man is hidden in the unmanifested world. The old Testament speaks of man as made in the image of God. The Vedas speak of the same men as “children of immortal bliss.”² Sri Ramakrishna said that God manifests Himself more through man than through any other being.

Shakespeare describes the creation of God in these words,

What a piece of work is a man! how noble
in reason! how infinite in faculty!
in form and moving how express and
admirable! in action how like an angel!
in apprehension how like a god! the
beauty of the world! the paragon of
animals! and yet, to me, what is this
quintessence of dust?³

Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before
high heaven As make the angels weep.⁴

Byron, the great English poet, wrote of God's creation of man as half deity and half dust, unable to soar or to sink. The Hindu sages put it very beautifully; there is an apparent man and a real man. The apparent man is depicted by the story of Adam and Eve. By his own act of violating the laws of God,

man courted the life of banishment. This is the apparent man. Hindus call this self-forgetfulness "Maya." It is due to ignorance. It is inexplicable and beginningless. The real man remains unchanged.

Sri Ramakrishna tells the story of a tigress who was with child. She attacked a flock of sheep. As she jumped on them, she died and gave birth to a cub. The tiger cub grew up in the midst of this flock of sheep, grazing and bleating as they did. Then one day the now full-grown tiger was forced by another attacking tiger to take a look at itself in a pond and to eat a piece of flesh. At first the sheep-tiger resisted and continued to bleat saying that it was a sheep. However, as soon as it tasted the blood of the flesh its dormant instincts became awakened and it came face to face with its own true nature through self-recognition. We see the apparent man with our senses. That apparent man is subject to birth, growth, old age, disease and death. He does good and evil and then experiences pain and pleasure. He goes through evolution and the path of reincarnation and evolves higher or lower through sex, wealth, position in society, love and hatred, war and peace, heaven and hell. These experiences belong to the apparent man.

Hindu sages have spoken of two paths, the northern and the southern, called Brahma-Loka and Pitr-Loka, whereby individuals go through further evolution according to their actions and the results thereof. Some of them, in order to come to this level, have to go through the experience of birth and death. They are reborn as humans and have to come back to the earth. Attainment of true knowledge and liberation is possible only for a human being. Through their evolution they come in contact with individuals who have attained true knowledge and liberation. The apparent man assumes body after body, either animal, human or angelic, for the realization of peace, freedom and blessedness. He goes through various finite experiences until he realizes their futility and finally discovers eternal peace and bliss by realizing beatitude in the infinite.

That which is infinite, is alone
happiness. There is no happiness in
anything finite.⁵

Lord Buddha's life story narrates how he had to go through five hundred births, until in the final birth his struggle was completed and he attained realization in Nirvana. Once in a while, a human being gets a glimpse of his true soul and gets a nostalgic longing for it. He compares two pictures, one going through birth and death and the other realizing the infinite, and thus comes to the real path.

Two birds that are ever associated
and have similar names cling to the
same tree. Of these, the one eats
the fruit of divergent tastes, and
the other looks on without eating.⁶

Then he becomes eager to realize his true nature which is everlasting life. He searches for a teacher and goes through spiritual disciplines, such as humility and reverence. The teacher gives him assurance that he will also reach the goal as earlier sages have realized it and that there is no necessity of fear.

Fear not, O learned one, there is no

death for thee; there is a means of
crossing this sea of relative existence;
that very way by which sages have gone
beyond it, I shall impart to thee.⁷

The teacher explains the cause of suffering as ignorance or Maya or self-forgetfulness and teaches him discrimination and detachment. At last he puts into his ears the great sacred symbol, “Tat Tvam Asi—Thou art That.”⁸ He explains what is meant by “Thou.” It is consciousness or spirit associated with a body. He then gives the meaning of “That.” It is also consciousness, but associated with the Creator or spirit. The common link between them is consciousness. In one instance it is limited, and in the other it is unlimited. The disciple is then asked to meditate on that spirit or pure consciousness, “Aham Brahmasmi— I am Brahman.”⁹ I am that pure consciousness, I am Brahman, I am that pure spirit, birthless, deathless, eternal embodiment of Satchidananda. This is the nature of peace, infinity and blessedness.

The teacher explains the nature of the real man. The real man is beyond body and senses, names and forms, one without a second, eternally pure and perfect. Because it is infinite, it is the source of all power and wisdom. The apparent man derives power and knowledge and bliss from this real man. All the solutions to problems come from this real man. The real strength in moments of despair comes from this real man. Prayers are answered by this real man. They are falsely attributed to God. This real man is God!

The purpose of meditation is to commune with this real man. By being detached from the body and material things, we come near this real man. The real man is the infinite spirit. He sees the same divine spirit everywhere. He knows how to give real love. He is fearless. He knows himself to be birthless and deathless. He is always under the spell of immortality. He keeps, as it were, this knowledge in his pocket and does his duty.

What happens to him after death? Four courses are laid down in the scriptures for the apparent man, such as heaven and hell. The real man regards death in a different way. Birth and death are only phases through which the apparent man has to pass.

As the indweller in the body experiences
childhood, youth and old age in the
body, he also passes on to another body.
The serene one is not affected thereby.¹⁰

Just as a snake casts off a slough from his body, similarly the man of pure knowledge gives up the body.

Just as the lifeless slough of a snake
is cast off and lies in the ant-hill,
so does the body lie. Then the self
becomes disembodied and immortal. . .¹¹

The soul, being infinite, does not go anywhere. He realizes infinitude. These ideas of going from

place to place do not occur in reality because he is infinite. Who or where to go? These are absurdities! Death means going beyond all limitations, freedom from hunger, thirst and other inevitable characteristics of the body. Therefore, it is the ultimate freedom.

Of the unborn One, whose consciousness is unflickering, there is a city with eleven gates. Meditating (on Him), one does not grieve and, becoming freed, one becomes emancipated.¹²

The really free realizes that freedom. He attains to a new dimension of consciousness. The Chandogya Upanishad uses the caterpillar, butterfly and moth as symbols of this change. A realized soul sees perfection everywhere. That is the secret of his own inner perfection. He realizes that the world is a projection of our own mind and the concepts like sin and virtue are all projections of our mind. From him has disappeared all selfishness. Selfishness comes from identification with finite objects like the body, house, community or country. He sees the whole universe as his own country. "...the three worlds are my native land."¹³ From him goes out fearlessness to everyone. His life is a blessedness to all.

He by whom the world is not afflicted and whom the world cannot afflict, he who is free from joy, anger, fear and anxiety—he is dear to Me.¹⁴

He is the ideal man, the perfect teacher to all. Is it possible to find out such an individual and to follow him? The scriptures have given examples of the "Jivanmukta", the individual who lives in the body but is not touched by the limitations of the body and mind. Such a man goes on with his work, inspired by genuine love, benevolence and infinite compassion. He is not befooled by appearance. He encounters the waves of ignorance and instantly discovers them. He is the one who really enjoys the world. He carries with him the secret of detachment. He does not seek the qualities of matter (sattva, rajas, tamas) nor shun them when they are present, knowing fully well that these are the outcome of the embodiedness of the perfect soul.

But, O mighty-armed, the one intuitive into the nature of Guna and karma knows that Gunas as senses merely abide with Gunas as objects, and does not become entangled.¹⁵

Such a person views death with calmness. He discovers that these two wheels, called life and death, have been joined together with a common pole. You catch hold of one wheel and cut the pole. The wheel in your hand stops without getting momentum. The body and the mind are one wheel and the soul is the other wheel. The pole is the law of Karma. Detachment is the sword by means of which the two wheels are separated. This is the theme of Chapter 15 of the Bhagavad Gita. Although the liberated soul is free from the necessity for rebirth, he may be born in order to show mankind the way

to achieve this freedom.

Good and bad are illusions. Both must eventually go, but in order to get rid of bad we have to resort to good. True knowledge is not possible for an immoral person. Good and evil are two coatings of Maya on the soul. First we must remove the coating of evil, then the coating of good, and finally reach the soul. In the knower of Brahman, there is no coating of evil. There may remain a trace of good, but there cannot be any evil action possible for him. He will only show good actions and thoughts. He is a living blessing.

What do we gain from such realization? Any power, superiority, health or longevity? In this world we are the traders of all these things. We seek gain and profit. The truth teaches us that we must go beyond all business. We are in communion with God and truth. In doing so we realize the highest freedom. “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”¹⁶ The devotees who are searching are afraid that this philosophy is pessimistic, that it makes us inactive and dries up the fountain of love. We ask this question to ourselves: is God morbid or inactive? Such fears are groundless. They come from the empty mind. All our ideas of love are based on trade and gain. A perfect soul alone knows the secret of love.

Sri Ramakrishna said, “One doesn't lose consciousness by thinking of Him who is all Spirit, all Consciousness. Shivanath once remarked that too much thinking about God confounds the brain. Thereupon I said to him, ‘How can one become unconscious by thinking of Consciousness?’”¹⁷

Such a devotee's object of love is not a lump of flesh and bone, but God, Satchidananda Himself. Husband sees God in the wife and wife sees God in the husband.

It is not for the sake of the husband,
my dear, that he is loved, but for
the sake of the Self. It is not for
the sake of the wife, my dear, that
she is loved, but for the sake of
the Self.¹⁸

Only a perfect soul sees what real beauty is. To ordinary people this world is a prison house, full of struggle, hatred, jealousy. To the man of realization it is ever blissful and full of joy. Let there be just twelve men and women who have realized God, who have realized peace and freedom within and show the same to others, and this world will be completely changed.

The Soul and Its Potential Divinity through Instinct, Reason, and Intuition

Humans have always wanted to know the truth. Most of us know things about ourselves and the external world through the senses. But a vast amount of the universe around us and within us, which is not gross, remains unknown. The Upanishads maintain that reason also is not sufficient to reveal the whole truth.

The wisdom that you have, O dearest one, which leads to sound knowledge when imparted only by someone else (other than the logician), is not to be obtained through argumentation.¹

The eye does not go there, nor speech, nor mind.²

In religions like Christianity, most of us have to depend upon faith for revelations. In Hinduism, the teachers discussed the meaning of faith and taught the disciplines which lead to the immediate direct perception of the truth, *darshana*.

This is to be attained through the mind. There is no diversity whatsoever. He who sees as though there is difference here, goes from death to death.³

Teachers like Sri Ramakrishna state through their own experience that the pure mind and the pure Atman are one.⁴ They also speak of the third eye, which gives spiritual vision. Supersensuous and supramental perceptions are beyond the physical and the mental. Until such perceptions are gained, the inquiry is not complete, and the human aspiration for truth is not fulfilled.

Perception involves a spiritual element, a knowing principle. That is how knowledge arises. A stone does not perceive another stone, for no perception is possible without consciousness being involved. According to Vedanta, the very nature of the soul is consciousness (Sat-Chit-Ananda-Existence, Knowledge, Bliss). It is not its quality, it is its very nature. “Brahman is truth, knowledge and infinite.”⁵ Consciousness is non-dual, homogeneous, beyond space, time, and causation. The real perceiver is only one. There is no second to him, nor can he be objectified. It is only the senses, like sight, that perceive an object reflected. Mind and other subtle sense organs function through

consciousness in the phenomenal world. The brain is only an instrument in that process. Modern scientists and psychologists equate the brain with the mind and the process of knowledge. Vedantic sages assert that the brain is actually an instrument and, therefore, is quite separate from consciousness. For example, when the brain is injured the consciousness is not destroyed. Consciousness is the divine spirit, the soul itself.

This consciousness is veiled by coverings called Maya. There are several layers of this Maya. It is in and through these coverings that the degree of manifestation of this consciousness is determined. The light of the Atman reaches the level of the individual self covered with various coatings, such as the senses, which create subject-object knowledge and the external universe. The clouds come and cover our eyesight. Out of our ignorance we say that the sun is covered. Clouds have no capacity to cover the sun. It is ever-shining. But our senses get covered, and we superimpose this covering on the sun. In exactly the same way this veiling and projecting power of maya keeps us away from the truth or reality. The mind has three states of perception: the unconscious (composed of both unconscious and subconscious), the conscious, and the superconscious. While modern psychology admits and investigates the first three—the unconscious, subconscious, and conscious—it does not take into consideration the superconscious. These different manifestations of consciousness are called instinct, reason, and intuition. Instinct is used at the subhuman level, reason at the human, and intuition at the superhuman level. They are three states of the same mind. To the extent that the mind is released from limitations or coverings, to that extent the real nature of the self is experienced. Let us try to examine the nature of these three states.

1. INSTINCT

Instinct always manifests at the subhuman level, although a vast number of human beings come under its spell. It produces automatic action, such as eating, digestion, movement of the heart and lungs, glands, and organs. There are not twenty separate persons in the body who make these movements. One individual performs all these functions. The general characteristic of instinct is that it is not accompanied by I-consciousness. Its best manifestation is seen in plants and animals. Plants and animals both respond automatically to pain and pleasure. This is found in most human beings also.

2. REASON

This faculty operates on the human plane. It is accompanied by I-consciousness and distinguishes itself from the instinctive level with “I”, which is predominantly absent in the subhuman species. On this plane a human being expresses himself as “I eat, I love, I hate, I earn money, I work, I distinguish between good and evil.” This is reason. It might be good or bad reason, but anyway, it is reason. It characterizes human actions and is called the plane of consciousness.

3. INTUITION

Just as there is a plane below consciousness, there is one above it. It is not accompanied by I-consciousness. Individuals, such as Christ, Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Krishna, and others, who have the highest spiritual unitary consciousness do not speak in terms of “I” because they do not live in the state of I-consciousness. Christ always addressed “My Father.” Sri Ramakrishna used to say, “My

Mother states; She told me; She revealed.” St. Paul says, “Not I, but Christ within me.” God is addressed directly, without consideration of the individual. In spiritual language this is called inspiration, intuition, or illumination. Prophets, mystics, and saints experience it. Samadhi is the term used in yoga and Vedanta to describe this communion between the higher self and lower self, which comes when the functioning of the mind stops and it is transcended.

Yoga is the control of thought waves in the mind.⁶

Waves of the mind subside and become calm. Only then is the bottom, the superconscious revelation, experienced. The veil becomes transparent. We see the truth directly. Originally, this vision of truth was colored by mental states called sattva, rajas, and tamas, but now it shines forth undistorted.

Many modern psychologists do not understand the difference between the unconscious and superconscious states. Two extremes look alike. Extreme light and extreme darkness have the same effect, because vision does not work in either case. Similarly, to an observer drunkenness and ecstasy, trance and epilepsy are mixed up in understanding. We take one for the other. Even some prophets had these epileptic fits, out of which they got a little glimpse, but that glimpse created much turmoil and suffering in the world. Sri Ramakrishna says:

One doesn't lose consciousness by
thinking of Him who is all spirit,
all consciousness.⁷

The question before us is how to distinguish between these two: superconscious and unconscious. The superconscious is awakened through spiritual discipline and control. It is a science; one has to go through the disciplines given by the teacher and the scriptures. It requires self-control, chastity, detachment, genuine love of God. Those qualities bring purity, spirituality, and moral elevation. On the other hand, in the case of the unconscious state, which is like a sleep, there is a state of complete forgetfulness and no enhancement of knowledge or change of character. A fool coming out of sleep or epilepsy remains a fool. Samadhi, on the other hand, completely transforms a person. He becomes a seer, a prophet. In spite of the outer similarity (absence of ego and indifference to the world), the two states are utterly different. The unconscious state is guided by selfishness, while the other is predominantly reflecting total unselfishness. One may ask, “What makes the difference?” The answer given by those who have reached that state is, “Constant communion with reality.”

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF INSTINCT, REASON, AND
INTUITION IN DEVELOPING SPIRITUAL QUALITY IN LIFE

1. INSTINCT

Instinct being the basic quality of human life, as we have stated above, it is common with the animal instincts with which a human being is born. Its scope is extremely limited. It appears to be natural and is liable to commit very few mistakes, such as in the case of the ant, vulture, or dog, though even animals get confused with the slightest change in the situation. Ultimately, they get into the rut of the instinct and follow the tendencies of the instinctive life. Instinct is inverted reason. It involves reason. A student who is learning to play the piano has to be very alert and attentive to begin

with and apply memory and, to a great extent, intellect. But after longer practice it becomes habit. Fingers move on the keys while the player may be doing different activities at the same time. Though we do actions instinctively, we acquire that instinct through reason and previous experience.

2. REASON

The scope of the faculty of reason is wider than instinct, though it involves many mistakes. There is always an element of doubt although the method of reason is scientific and rational. Reason is based on a certain amount of sense perception. There are, however, certain concepts which are unknowable by reason; concepts such as God, soul, immortality, etc. For these ideas there are no sense data. Such experiences as, for example, love, justice, freedom, democracy, unity of existence, divinity of soul, and fatherhood or motherhood of God, though based on superconscious experience, are accepted as real, but there is no proof possible through reason. Through reason at its best we distort them. Reason is guided by self-interest and expediency. Justice, for example, is the justice of the strong. In order to protect our own democratic ideal we deny it to others. We develop different standards of justice. Our present civilization is guided by reason, more or less. Still there is strife, competition, self-interest, and narrow nationalism. We, in other words, take a short-range view and do not apply the faculty of reason in its full scope. Reason brings about and develops the universal in us and is confirmed by intuition. It is a universal fact.

3. INTUITION

This faculty has an unlimited field because its application transcends the limitations of time, space, and causation. It does not make any mistake, like instinct, but it is only developed and used by prophets and seers.

The true foundation of human culture is intuition, which is based on superconscious experience. That experience speaks of God, the kingdom of heaven, nirvana, and is essentially of non-dualistic content. It does not contradict reason in any form but cannot be arrived at through reason. Reason rightly pursued with the help of spiritual discipline emerges as intuition. Its foundation is a priceless heritage of man. Religion is not based upon reason but supersensuous experience. It does not contradict reason but accepts it as being harmonious with intuition. Intellectual reason does not last long. Intuition is the basis of ethics and morality. It advocates all-embracing love and complete self-sacrifice. On the contrary, reason accepts partial sacrifice for greater personal good. But a saint makes a complete sacrifice, without any conditions.

His mind being harmonized by yoga, he
sees himself in all beings and all
beings in himself; he sees the same
in all.⁸

Some examples of this are Christ, Sri Ramakrishna, and Buddha. To them material gains were transitory and secondary. Socrates was offered an opportunity to escape death. He did not. It is true that through intuitive experience alone one knows the meaning of love, sacrifice, freedom, God, immortality; for they do not belong to the realm of reason. Reason explains them on the plane of mind and intellect.

Instinct, reason, and intuition, when applied to the social situation, emerge as competition, cooperation, and consecration. Competition follows the laws of the jungle. Everyone is for himself. Violence, hatred, cruelty, malice are the modes through which competition works. Might is right. It brings suffering for all because instinct is the guiding factor. Cooperation builds an alliance of the people to form a nation with similar interests for seeking protection against a common enemy and also teaches the principle of sacrifice without hurting the selfish interests. The world gets divided into spheres of influences, bringing about a balance of power dictated by self-interest. Here we find that there is a play of reason, and the blind instinctive nature is overcome. Wherever you find consecration, that society is at a very high level of culture. Individualistic interests are completely curbed in favour of the interest of others. If the majority of people in the society follow it, that will be a "great society." Such tendencies as aggression, exploitation, war or strife, are slowly reduced and ultimately overcome. Society has yet to reach that state. Only a few individuals, who are called holy men or saints, clearly reflect that characteristic, and they are the salt of the earth. It is very difficult for the masses to form a social concept of this experience. How difficult it will be to bring it into practice! But surely human beings are making headway toward that social concept. We are all looking forward with a great hope to having these characteristics brought into the social fabric in the future.

He who sees Me everywhere and sees all
in Me, he never becomes lost to Me,
nor do I become lost to him.⁹

The supernatural experiences of the prophets, saints, and seers are based on intuition. It is often expressed in symbolical language (such as the angel descending on Christ or Mohammed, light from God). Science is suspicious of such experiences and expression. Vedanta speaks of knowledge coming from within a human being, himself. Instinct, reason, and intuition are three states of the faculty of mind. Instinct can be transformed into reason, and reason into intuition with spiritual discipline. The same divine energy passing through the three channels of organs, which are external, internal, and the light of the heart, is called instinct, reason, and intuition. Intuition can be developed by all because that spiritual spark is present in every human being.

A note of warning is necessary at this stage. Human beings always have a tendency to go by shortcuts, by intensifying emotional urges and imagination. A certain type of experience is received through this emotion and imagination, which we wrongly equate with intuition and thus fool ourselves. It is for this reason that the science of yoga warns us against giving up the faculty of reason and advises us to cultivate this faculty as far as possible and then go beyond, because intuition will never contradict reason. If a holy man acts in an irrational way, never trust him. He deceives himself and others. Sometimes it is seen that people stumble into spiritual experiences. They are seen not to follow the path of reason to confirm and reconfirm the genuineness of their intuitive experiences. Such people are seen to be fanatical. They no doubt do some good, but they also do bad, and the bad exceeds the good. Therefore, the spiritual seeker must practise spiritual discipline and check the results through reason at every step. Then only will his actions and teachings promote his own welfare and the good of humanity at large. He is a real benefactor of the world.

Consciousness and Its Manifestations

The subject of consciousness has always been most puzzling. Thinkers of the world are divided in their opinions concerning the origin and nature of consciousness. Most of them have tried to avoid the question rather than answer it. Consciousness can be more or less divided into two categories: relative and absolute. The relative consciousness is acquired through use of the sense organs and is always associated with physical objects or ideas about them. We use such terms in our daily lives as “I see,” “I feel,” “I hear.” The object we describe may even be God Himself. God is thought of as a consciousness with content, seen by the use of the relative consciousness. But in the non-dualistic Vedanta, absolute consciousness is also discussed. It has no content or object. It is like a blazing fire without the fuel. The finite mind cannot grasp it.

The two principal entities without which no experience is possible are self and non-self; spirit and matter; subject and object. They are two completely different things—as different as light and darkness. Yet in practical life, we superimpose the attributes of one upon the other. The true nature of the self, for example, is considered according to Vedantic thought as ever pure (nitya suddha), ever free (nitya mukta), and ever self-realized (nitya siddha). It is all-pervading, beyond time, space, and causation. It alone exists. Experiences reported to us by the great saints and mystics through the ages support this view. Just as there is neither day nor night from the vantage point of the sun itself, so too, from the standpoint of the Absolute Self, the universe does not exist separately from the Atman.

The non-Self consists of tangible and intangible matter. It is always changing, for it is mortal, with beginning and end, perishable, multiple and inert. According to Vedantic philosophy, this includes organic, inorganic, and psychic matter—body, mind, senses, and ego.

The Self identifies with the non-Self due to ignorance. This identification is not based on reality. Such a state is termed Maya. Although the red flower is reflected in a transparent crystal, yet the crystal is not red. The redness has been transferred through its reflection in the crystal. Similarly, through ignorance, we believe that our soul is dependent on the body with all its experiences of birth, death, pleasure, pain, hunger, thirst, good, evil, etc. What is the cause of this identification, one may ask. All great world religions and philosophies have had to establish spiritual disciplines to deal with this problem.

Two basic solutions have been given by the various philosophies for the question of why the soul identifies with the bodily element. One viewpoint sees the cause of identification as outside the soul. Such forces as Satan, Mara, or Ahriman affect us and cause the identification. The second viewpoint sees the cause as within the soul itself and is perhaps more scientific and nearer to the truth than the first. Vedanta terms this “Maya”, a state of error due to ignorance and self-forgetfulness. This Maya has two aspects—the power of veiling or covering and the power of projection. These reside within the Self or the spirit itself. These dual powers create a mirage-like effect. Maya brings into existence

material objects and, by superimposing them on the world, makes this identification seem real. A rope may be seen as a snake. In the desert, water appears in the distance, though it is really sand. As long as one is under the influence of Maya, one takes such visions to be real. A dream snake is also real—so long as the dream lasts. In our worldly life, such experiences as birth-death, pain-pleasure, good-evil etc., all seem so real, though the waking state and the dream state are both a mirage. Actually, the Self does not change. Sand is not changed into water, nor is the rope changed into a snake. This is all illusion. Likewise, even when we think that we are bound, we are always Nitya Suddha (ever pure), Nitya Siddha (ever self-realized), and Nitya Mukta (ever free).

Through Maya alone, one identifies one's self with various objects, such as body, mind, senses, community, country, etc. Thus is our daily life of bondage and unhappiness. The purpose of religion is to dissociate the soul from identification with the non-Self by negation of the non-Self through discrimination and detachment. This non-Self manifests through five layers or sheaths: physical, vital, mental, intellectual, and blissful—both gross and subtle—with the five subtle sheaths supporting the five gross ones. They are called, respectively, the Annamaya Kosha, Pranamaya Kosha, Manomaya Kosha, Vijnanamaya Kosha, and Anandamaya Kosha. Atman or the highest consciousness is the inmost of all. This inmost nature is not seen on account of the coverings, just as the sun is not seen behind layers of clouds. The Koshas (sheaths) can be eliminated by the process of discrimination, called “Neti, neti” (a reasoning process which says, “I am not this, not this, etc.”). It is a very hard and drastic method which is followed by monks in India, with the two principal disciplines being discrimination and renunciation. One has to be endowed with a sharp intellect and strong willpower. There are other possible methods which may be employed but the underlying basic element in all of them is the necessary spirit of detachment. All religions recognize the principle of detachment. “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”¹ We will adopt the following method to understand the sheaths and their negation; we will show how each reflects the characteristics of relative and not absolute consciousness.

The gross physical sheath (Annamaya Kosha) represents the physical body—hands, feet, and various organs. They are created by food and sustained by food. They are also subject to decay when food is lacking. This body is non-existent before birth and after death. It consists of flesh, blood, bone, marrow, skin, nerves, etc. Its virtues, such as strength and beauty, are but temporary. Ignorant people call this body the Self and erroneously get identified with it. They seek and work for its continuity. Such people can only be termed materialists, for the body is not the real Self. The real Self, as we have seen, is declared by the Vedanta as eternal, imperishable and unchanging. The body can be at the most an instrument, an external structure, to be used by its inhabitant, the soul. This body is the soul's chariot, discarded when the journey of life comes to an end.

The Pranamaya Kosha or vital sheath is more subtle and internalized. The “units”, consisting of Prana (the vital energy), are what make the body capable of activity through the five-fold manifestation of Prana (breath), Apana (elimination), Vyana (pervading), Udana (vomiting), and Samana (digestion). Only with their help do we move the body and the limbs. Prana enters the body at birth and leaves at the time of death. The Self identifies with Prana and erroneously thinks, “I am active,” “I am hungry,” “I am thirsty,” etc. This cannot be the Self, however, for it is subject to change, consists of parts, is material in nature, and has a beginning and an end.

The Manomaya Kosha or mental sheath consists of mind and the senses. It is the mind which raises

doubts and creates various feelings of diversity and differentiation. By identifying with the mental sheath, we lead our daily lives constantly alternating between feelings of pain and pleasure, restlessness and calmness, fear and assuredness, bondage and freedom. All these diverse moods are self-created mental states. Mind is the seat of desires. Our view of the world is determined by the condition of our mind. For those harbouring wicked thoughts, the world is seen as a veritable hell. For the pious-minded, it is seen as a heaven. But for the really pure-minded person, it is seen that God, Himself, has become all this. Greed, anger, and various passions are states of mind that may compel us to act violently in the world. Distinctions of persons are also made by the mind. The mind in an exalted state does not distinguish enemies and friends but looks on all equally as friends. Since our reactions to the world express our mental state, it is, thus, important to achieve purity of mind. This is the basis for real spiritual discipline. Then and then only can we see God within and without. The soul identifies itself with the mind and thinks, “I am happy,” “I am unhappy,” etc. This mental sheath cannot be the Self because it is based on change and has a beginning and an end.

The Vijnanamaya Kosha or sheath of intellect represents the higher state of the inner organ of mind—the determinative faculty. When the Self or all-pervading spirit is reflected in the Buddhi, it becomes individualized, much as the sun's rays become individualized when reflected in waves of water. In its individualized state, the Self is subject to transmigration and reincarnation. Death of the body does not destroy it. It assumes new bodies for further experiences. In identifying with this sheath, the Self alternates between states of pleasure and pain and various feelings of right and wrong, etc. It is subjected to the laws of Karma and thereby carried upwards and down on the tide of cause and effect, thus losing freedom. Being subject to change, the individualized Self cannot be the true Self—Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss Absolute (Sat-Chit-Ananda).

In the Anandamaya Kosha or blissful sheath, individuality gets lost and merged into unity associated with cosmic ignorance. It is very subtle and above individuality. Its chief attributes are pleasurable and restfulness. The soul reaps the fruits of its good actions and enjoys them, much as one enjoys the pleasant after-effects of hearing wonderful music. In this state, one is not conscious of one's self as an individual. Therefore, there is the absence of pain and suffering, as in deep sleep. The Self identified with this state experiences pleasure and rest. But this state cannot be the Self, because it is the result of actions which are temporal and changeable in nature. Though attractive and pleasing, it should be transcended.

What remains after the negation of the five sheaths? Is the individuality completely lost? Since we are accustomed to hang on to this individuality in our psycho-physical life, we are very much afraid of losing it. Loss of individuality may mean annihilation, entering into a void never to return. People therefore dread such a state, believing that there is no place for love and affection. However, the Vedantic sages have unanimously declared that this state cannot be a void because at every stage the Perceiver remains, and this Perceiver is pure consciousness itself. He is the Eternal Witness of the changing phenomena of this universe. This is the true nature of the Self. To realize it is indescribable. The ordinary human being is like the salt doll in the parable of Sri Ramakrishna. The doll wanted to jump into the ocean to discover its depth and thus be able to describe it. But the doll was completely dissolved in the ocean—becoming one with it.

In samadhi one attains the Knowledge of Brahman—one realizes Brahman. In that

state reasoning stops altogether, and man becomes mute. He has no power to describe the nature of Brahman.

Once a salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean....It wanted to tell others how deep the water was. But this it could never do, for no sooner did it get into the water than it got dissolved. Now who was there to report the ocean's depth?²

In the highest state of realization, there is no further identification with Maya or its effects or the modifications of matter. The pristine glory of the free soul is realized. Once the realm of Light has been entered, the soul is no longer deceived by darkness or dreams. The fully awakened soul has recovered itself, much as the sick person who was injured becomes healed and regains full faculties once more. He is called Jivan Mukta. In the world, he is called Christ, Krishna, Buddha, Sri Ramakrishna. The fully realized soul has no personal attachment, but at the same time works for the welfare of the whole world. He looks upon all beings equally, never injuring anyone by deeds, words, or thoughts. Ever-fearless, he is no longer disturbed by the pairs of opposites. This is a free soul. This is the state of pure consciousness.

Analysis of Human Experience

A person is fitted with sense organs. Through these sense organs he sees the external world, and whatever is seen through these instruments is taken for granted, and he reacts to these impressions. This reaction is ordinarily spoken of as knowledge. Very few individuals give a thought to this process of knowledge. The vast majority of people take this process for granted and base their activities and thoughts on it. An attempt is made below to analyze this process through a critical study so that we shall have a guide in our behaviour. We shall also come to know how far the knowledge we receive from the sense organs and our reactions thereto are true.

The rational method of arriving at truth is to assume that there is no dogma or creed or imagination. Experience is the only data accepted by a thinking human being. This experience is based upon perception. When somebody questions us about truth, we immediately answer that this is what I have seen. This brings us to another question as to the ultimate criteria for experience. Experience depends upon the nature of the subject and object, the seer and the seen. For all practical purposes, waking state experiences are generally deemed to be valuable or significant. Naturally, the sense organs and the mind are considered the only valid instruments of proof. A partial experience reveals a partial truth and not the whole truth. It follows that the truths revealed to us by science are partial truths because they do not take into consideration all modes of experience. What about sleep and dream? We spend one third of our life in the sleeping state. It does give some kind of experience to us, and we learn from that experience. Modern psychology has built a strong edifice called psychoanalysis. Through this recently adopted scientific method a great deal of research has been done, and a number of contributions have been made to human improvement. Yet, this science neglects deep sleep.

The next question is whether an individual in the three modes of experience, namely the waking state, the dream state, and the dreamless state, is one and the same entity or is three separate and distinct entities. Assuming there is one entity, then how is it coordinating the three entirely different states of existence?

The problem in the final argument is the different levels of experience, i.e., experience which is gained on the physical level, the mental level, and the self-transcendent level. What do we obtain from the study of these three levels? Such a study reveals the true nature of reality, which is all-encompassing and includes all thinking processes. It speaks of Atman.

A study of the eighth chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad can help us in our understanding of this problem. It takes into consideration all the modes of knowledge and experience. The story in that chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad relates that Prajapati, the creator, has two types of progeny. One is the daivic or celestial and the other is the danava or demonic. Both types of children hear about the Self, which is free from evil and decay, undying, free from sorrow, hunger, thirst and desire, and which should be sought after and understood in experience. At the end, it is stated that if anybody

knows about this eternal Self, he obtains all the worlds and realizes all his desires. The two kinds of children are represented by two leaders. Indra is the leader of the gods, and Virochana is the leader of the demons. Both of them approach Prajapati with the sole intention of knowing the nature of the Atman. They are interested in realizing the Self and transcending evil and becoming immortal. Naturally, they want to be free from hunger and thirst and all the negative experiences we have to go through in the world. Prajapati prescribed for them both a discipline, which was to be practiced for thirty-two years. At the end of this period the two representatives approached Prajapati for instruction. The teacher asked them to look into a pool of water and into a mirror. Then he said, "What you see in the water and in the mirror is He, that immortal Self." He asked both of them to put on the best of their clothes, ornaments, etc. and look into the water and the mirror again, and he asked them again what they saw? They replied that they saw exactly what they were, well decorated with cloths and ornaments. Prajapati repeated that this is your Self. Hearing this, both the representatives returned to their people satisfied, knowing the nature of the Self.

Virochana, the leader of the demons, concluded that this body is the Self. As we decorate this body, so is the reflection. If it is well dressed, it appears well. A shabbily dressed person appears shabby. Naturally, he concluded that the physical appearances are true. Therefore, as of today, those of us who are demonic in our attitudes and perceptions believe in this body and seek food and drink for sustenance, clothes, and all the externals. We give much attention to our body before and after death. This mode of thinking is called the philosophy of the asuras, the demons, because it is based on the physical and selfish aspect, without any faith or belief in a higher reality. These human beings live only in the waking-state experience and believe in that experience only.

By studying the reaction of the other representative, Indra, we get a metaphysical or spiritual view of the nature of the Self as it is revealed through spiritual practices. Indra returned to Prajapati again. He had reflected and finally decided that what he had observed by seeing himself in the water and the mirror did not fulfil any of the conditions of the statement made earlier by Prajapati, namely, that the Self is free from evil, is not destroyed, is undying, free from sorrow, hunger, thirst and desire. So, this self called the physical self is not what the teacher was talking about. The bodily self could not be the immortal Self. The body can become lame, blind, or injured in many ways. Prajapati then asked Indra to practise spiritual disciplines for another thirty-two years. At the end of this period Prajapati gave him another set of instructions. He said, "He who moves about in dreams enjoys dream experiences." Certainly, these experiences are superior to the waking state experiences. Indra, apparently satisfied, went away, but after further reflection he returned again. His problem was that though the dream body may not be affected by the waking state experiences such as blindness, deafness, lameness, hunger, etc., yet it too suffers from illness, pain, etc. There are experiences on the mental level also. Artists, poets, scholars, deep thinkers, all experience sufferings of depression, anxieties, cares, etc. Prajapati instructed him to perform spiritual disciplines for another thirty-two years. A deeper level of experience based upon more profound instructions followed. Prajapati explained that there exists a deeper level. It is untainted by the waking and dream state experiences, and it is entirely free from all defects and merits. This state, called the deep sleep experience, gives complete rest. Indra saw the superiority and transcendence of this state over the two previous states, but after reflection he thought that the self in this condition remains unconscious. It has no knowledge of either the self or the non-self. It is almost utter annihilation. Indra returned to Prajapati and told him that this state is of no avail. In the deep sleep state one becomes energized, and all the waves of the mind are calmed down, but only temporarily, for after this experience one becomes involved, as before, in the activities of the

world. Deep sleep is a momentary experience. There is an experience of rest, relaxation, peace, etc. After the deep sleep experience all senses become refined, awareness is increased, and with it a great appreciation for the beauty in nature, music, works of art, and meritorious action is enjoyed by the individual. There is also an experience of self-oblivion. The self of the deep sleep is not the body, nor associated with human experience. It is a transcendental experience, not associated with the functions of the body nor the functions of the mind. It is different from them. At the same time it is not the real Self. The true Self reveals the permanent transcendental experience. The ego and its impressions and experiences are totally transcended. The thief, the murderer, the brahmin, the monk, and the sick are all completely changed.

The true Self is the foundation of all experiences. It is Turiya, pure consciousness. It presents all the three stages and is the foundation thereof. It uses three bodies. In the waking state it uses the senses and the mind, in the dream state only the mind, and in deep sleep it is detached from body and mind. But the Turiya or transcendental state is the foundation of all experiences. It is beyond space, time and causation. It is beyond space, but space cannot exist without it; it is beyond time, beyond causality, but they cannot exist without it. Space, time and the interdependence of cause and effect can be understood by this detached consciousness. It is like the screen and the cinema film. The film is moving but the screen is not. It is because of the stillness or immobility of the screen that we get the meaning of the moving film. If the screen were to move along with the film, we would have no understanding. Similarly, it is because of the constancy and unshakeableness of Brahman in space, time and causation, that the meaning of the world is understood by a conscious being.

The Taittiriya Upanishad discusses five sheaths or coverings of the Self which produce experiences on different levels. The goal is to realize the freedom of the Self from the non-Self through the discipline of renunciation of the non-Self. Renunciation is the basis of the spiritual life and discipline. This discipline is divided into four channels. The first is called Karma Yoga or renunciation of actions and the fruits thereof through the discipline of ethics and unselfishness. The second is Bhakti Yoga, which is renunciation of enjoyment here and hereafter through devotion to God. The next, Raja Yoga, develops the discriminating faculties of the individual and, with the help of psychic powers, helps him to distinguish between Purusha, or Self, and Prakriti, or nature. Finally, through Jnana Yoga, with the help of complete renunciation, the individual becomes aware of Turiya, or the transcendental Self, as the only real existence.

Through ignorance we identify ourselves with the non-Self. The five sheaths are like a folding telescope, whose parts fit one inside the other, the gross permeated by the subtle. The real Self works through the five sheaths and gathers experiences on all five planes.

1. THE PHYSICAL OR MATERIAL SHEATH (ANNAMAYA KOSHA)

It consists of the body, hands, feet, head, etc. It is created with food and sustained by food. It is non-existent before birth and after death. Its virtues are beauty, strength, and health. It is transitory. It experiences pain and pleasure.

The contacts of the senses with their

objects create, O Son of Kunti,
feelings of heat and cold, of pain and
pleasure. They come and go and are
impermanent. Bear them patiently, O
Bharata.¹

The materialists seek perfection in and through bodily experiences. Therefore, they are called demons or asuras. The real Self cannot completely express itself through the body. Poets are trying to express the inexpressible through pen and ink, musicians and artists through musical instruments and the arts. The body can be an instrument, like a house or a carriage, to express the nature of the Self, but the real nature of the Self can be expressed only through silence. This experience of the Self cannot be conveyed to others. Everyone has to get this experience independently.

2. THE VITAL SHEATH (PRANAMAYA KOSHA)

It is subtler than the gross sheath. The unit, composed of prana and the organs, functions in a simple type of animal like the jelly-fish or amoeba, expressing itself through simple actions of life such as eating, drinking, digesting, rejecting and propagating. In human beings also this sheath exists and is expressed through hunger, thirst, and breath. The experience on this level cannot be higher. Therefore, it also points to a higher experience.

3. THE MENTAL SHEATH (MANOMAYA KOSHA)

This unit consists of mind and the sense organs. Its functions lead us to the diversity of I and you. It is the seat of desires. It experiences doubt. Its daily life consists of pain and pleasure, courage and fear, purity and impurity, greed and lust, etc. It is responsible for a worldview. Our worldview consists of the world as it is plus our mind! The ideas of heaven, hell, beauty, pleasure, indifference, etc. can all be changed. All emotions and desires can be purified by self-control and one-pointed meditation, i.e., by leading a spiritual life.

Let a man raise himself by his own self;
let him not debase himself. For he is
himself his friend, himself his foe.²

Experiences on this level cannot be the highest. They can bring change, and there it ends.

4. THE INTELLIGENCE SHEATH (VIJNANAMAYA KOSHA)

At this level consciousness becomes self-conscious. Instinct becomes reason. It functions as an

individual. A human being experiences this level; animals and vegetables do not. The experience on this level is that of an individualized ego. It transmigrates. Death cannot destroy it. It lasts as long as Maya lasts. It assumes new bodies, goes up and down. Jivahood or individuality is a limitation of the real Self. One cannot get the highest experience at this stage.

5. THE BLISSFUL SHEATH (ANANDAMAYA KOSHA)

At this stage one gets the experience of self-transcendence. Individuality is transcended. It is found in the deep sleep state. It comes out of the fruition of good and unselfish actions. The experience in this state comes through the unconscious, so it is a passive experience. This is the nearest experience of the Atman on the relative plane. It is possible for all. It is the proof of a non-dual Self residing in all of us, but the joy experienced in this state is only a glimpse. One comes back to the world of the senses, the world of sorrow and pain, and, therefore, it is not the true freedom.

6. TRANSCENDENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS (TURIYA)

The experience of Atman is beyond the five sheaths. All five sheaths have to be transcended, and what remains thereafter is the Void. The thought of the loss of individuality frightens most people, but here the goal of life has been reached and what remains is the Pure Truth (Absolute). One no longer peers through a dark glass but sees God face to face. The body may fall away, but there is no harm in this. The body and the organs were mere molds. The goal of life, namely the infinite, has been realized. It cannot be described for it is indescribable. A description of an object or an inner experience can be given if there is a comparison. In this world there is no resemblance of a subject or object to the Absolute Reality. St. Thomas Aquinas had that experience. Afterwards, he discontinued the writing of the Summa Theologica. In the light of this experience writing appears insignificant. Swami Saradananda, one of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, gave up writing the biography of his guru. Although he was urged by many intimate brother disciples and other monks, he could not be persuaded to finish the life-story of Sri Ramakrishna because he discovered that the infinite pages of the life of Sri Ramakrishna could never be completed. St. Augustine in his Confessions describes the ascending states of consciousness that a spiritual seeker goes through. He writes, “We soared with ardent longing towards the selfsame, the unquenching one; we passed from stage to stage through all material things and heaven itself (anandamaya kosha), and then we began a more inward ascent (beginning of renunciation) by thinking and speaking and marvelling at Thy questions (shabda), and so we ascended our own minds (manas) and passed beyond them, and we talked and yearned for the life that is neither past nor future but present only (beyond time), for it is eternal. We barely touched it with the utmost leap of our heart (parabhakti).”³

What do we learn from the analysis of our experience? We gain the awareness that the Absolute Reality, called Atman, is the only experiencer. He is the eternal subject, pure consciousness, beyond time, space, and causation, eternal, immortal, detached. There is no actor, but a spectator. There is no doer, but a witness. These are different stages of experience. Man is like a great fish swimming between two banks without ever touching them. Like a hawk, tired of flying and wanting to take rest,

we human beings travel from one state of consciousness to another, physical, vital, mental, intellectual, and blissful, and ultimately merge into that one which is transcendental, without any subject or object. No experience, good or evil, can stain it. Nothing clings to the Atman. It is the immutable basis of life. If we remain conscious of It, then we maintain calmness and the understanding that in all actions we are not the doer. He is the eternal, the immortal. Our doubts, our distress, our desires and longings converge into the vision of the Eternal.

Persons and Principles in Religion

Religions, as they have reached us over the millennia, may be classed under two categories. One type may be called historical and the other one nonhistorical. Under the first heading are generally included such religions as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism because they are based upon the teachings and words of a historical person. This standard is not accepted by all. According to the Hindus, very ancient history becomes mythology after a long, long time has elapsed. Most of the so-called history is constructed by the devotees or groups and stamped as historical although there may be no authentic proof. But votaries of that religion accept it as historical. Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed are accepted as historical figures, and their teachings and words are considered to be the foundation of morality, ethics, conduct, philosophy, and metaphysics. The modern Western world is very anxious about the historicity of the prophets and the religions they preached. If the historicity of the founder is disputed, then the whole structure of that religion falls to pieces. This point has served as the source of friction among the fanatical adherents of religions. They each speak of being the chosen people, capable of receiving salvation and grace: “the only prophet,” “the only begotten son,” “the only receiver of laws.” Yet we have the utterances of great saints, such as St. Augustine. According to him, that which is called the Christian religion had existed from the beginning of the human race. When Christ came in flesh and blood, the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christianity. According to Buddhist, the religion was not started by Lord Buddha, the person. It is a state of enlightenment. Everyone can be Buddha. But these very important points are forgotten by the followers of religions with the passage of time, and what remains is only a dogma, a shell.

Among the nonhistorical religions, the best example is Hinduism. The other name of Hinduism is Sanatana Dharma, the Eternal Religion. As such, there is no human founder. It is based on the teachings of the Vedas, which are eternal laws discovered by the sages. Their life history is not known. These sages are found among both men and women of all castes and stages of life. The common factor in them all is the purity of their hearts and their simple, uncomplicated, and truthful lives. Krishna is not the founder of Hinduism. He interpreted the universal principles laid down in the Vedas through His message, which is called the Bhagavad Gita. Similarly, others like Rama, Shankaracharya, Ramanuja, and Ramakrishna are the interpreters of the age-old universal truth. Their teachings and their lives are harmonious and enable the reader to understand clearly the principles of religion so that they can be put into practice in their own times. At the same time the truth is never lost and is not found to be contradictory at any time. The method they used was three-fold: philosophy, mythology, and ritual. The central teaching of the Vedas is that the manifest world is imperfect but through these imperfections passes a thread which is called God, who is perfection. This perfect unity embraces all—human beings, animals, superhuman beings, heaven, earth, and interspaces, and yet transcends them all.

This perfect unity, which is behind the diversity, is expressed in the Vedas as, “Tat Tvam Asi—Thou art That,” and is the last word of spiritual experience. The subsequent discoveries pronounced from time to time by saints and seers are only a restatement of this same truth. Prophets and sages explain this truth in different forms to suit different times, conditions, and environments. Christ said, “I and my Father are one.”¹ “The kingdom of heaven is within you.”² This unity is the basis of ethics, morality, human relationships, democracy, and freedom. In Hinduism this is called Dharma or eternal truth, which is the foundation of the universal life. It gets distorted by emphasis on personalities and is covered by dogmas, creeds, and rituals by unilluminated minds, and this ends in quarrels and destruction. A prophet is born; he is not made. In him we find the clear traces of God. In his life we do not find any contradiction. He is a tremendous wave of harmony and gathers all the individuals and leads them in unity.

In Hinduism we find all these principles as in other religions, and yet Hinduism makes room for persons. The divine truth must be brought to the level of humanity. This is done through secondary scriptures, called Smritis and Puranas. There, the teachers are many. They are called saints and sages. They demonstrate the Vedic teaching through stories and anecdotes based on truth, unselfishness, love, detachment, chastity, etc. There is no such thing as a purely spiritual religion. It becomes dry intellectualism. You must sow the seed which contains both kernel and husk. Beginners need concrete support for meditation, concentration, and the experience of harmony. Thus all religions provide symbols of worship, in both human and concrete forms. The Vedas speak of teachers, gurus, fathers, and redeemers, as well as sacrifices and rituals to commune with the deities, powers, or manifestations of Godhead. The Puranas speak of incarnations, images, and rituals. Buddha took the place of an incarnation in later Buddhism, and Northern Buddhism is full of rituals. In Christianity we have got Christ, angels, saints, Bible, altar, and the endless rituals of the Catholic Church. In the Protestant faith we have got prayer and singing but an absence of rituals, and, hence, the faith cannot always fulfil the emotional cravings of the seekers of truth. In Islam we have got the prophet Mohammed, the Kaaba, and Mecca. In Judaism we have got the ark, the angels and several other things in common. Sri Ramakrishna and St. Francis both worshipped through symbols and rituals and transcended them. A universal religion contains both personal and impersonal elements. The impersonal truth is the basis of both, but its application is through personalities. It is not created by reason or intellect; it is self-created like the law of gravitation. It is only revealed to pure souls through contemplation and self-control. Irrespective of caste or creed or sect, it is directly perceived without any intermediary. The scope of these principles covers the nature of the soul and its destiny, its relationship with the body, the relationship between man and his fellow beings, the nature of this universe (is it merely mechanical or spiritual?), the nature of the Godhead, and Its relationship with the universe and human beings. It is a total and integrated picture of life, which embraces the whole of humanity. It teaches the same ethics for all civilizations both in the past and in the present, whether primitive or highly developed. It must suit all temperaments—active, emotional, or contemplative—and must fulfil all human aspirations, comprising four values: dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kama (desire), and moksha (freedom). At the same time, it must not contradict reason. It must also account harmoniously for various forces such as science, art, literature, and other faculties seen in the human being. Above all, it must show the way to freedom, peace, and blessedness.

From evil lead me to good. From darkness
lead me to light. From death lead me

to Immortality.³

Historical religions, based upon the life and teachings of one person, often claim to be universal in content, as in the case of Islam and Christianity. It has been found that a person, however great, cannot satisfy all types of minds. Krishna may satisfy his followers in India, Mohammed and Christ in different parts of the world; still in order to be universal these various teachers of mankind have to manifest universal principles which are not contradictory. We, therefore, do not need universal principles—they are already existing. What we need are the proper interpreters of these universal principles through the practical teaching and demonstration of these principles in the life of the teacher. Man has existed for more than three million years. Great civilizations have flourished. Man will continue to exist. But his existence will not be smooth sailing until the universal element that passes through every bit of creation is understood, practised, and accepted. The morality and conduct of all humanity cannot be determined by the words of one person. We do not even know the authentic words of a person born five thousand or two thousand years ago. In the Bible the code of conduct has been based upon the teachings of one person. If these teachings are not properly understood, they may create a dangerous situation. The basis for ethics must be understood: eternal solidarity of man, unity of existence. This is the only basis for love and freedom.

On the other hand, the vast majority of mankind needs a personality.

Greater is their difficulty whose mindst
are set on the Unmanifested, for the
goal of the Unmanifested is very hard
for the embodied to reach.⁴

Take for example, the case of love and friendship. People feel the need to respect and adore some person. In the absence of proper direction there is every possibility of choosing an ideal which is unworthy of our reverence and love, such as ghosts, spooks, sun, or stars.

The worshippers of the gods go to the gods,
the worshippers of the manes go to the manes,
the worshippers of the spirits go to the
spirits, and My worshippers come to Me.⁵

Christ, Buddha, and Krishna are much more worthy of human worship than anyone else we can conceive of. Dictators, such as Stalin and Hitler, may have been liked by a few, but they are despised by the generality of the people. Therefore, Godmen should command our devotion and worship. The Hindu attitude is extreme catholicity.

Whatever being there is glorious,
prosperous, or powerful, know that
to have sprung but from a spark of My
splendour.⁶

One should choose one's own ideal with this background in mind and show respect for all others. These Godmen are the messengers of God.

Though I am unborn, imperishable and
the Lord of beings, yet subjugating My
Prakriti, I come into being by My own Maya.⁷

Fools disregard Me as one clad in human
form, not knowing My higher nature as the
Great Lord of beings.⁸

The ultimate truth is important and can be described only as Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, and Bliss Absolute. It cannot be perceived through the senses. When the senses try for understanding they come back unfulfilled. You cannot know it by analyzing dull lifeless matter. You cannot rely upon your own mind, since it is changing every moment. The study of books alone also cannot give us a definite answer. The incarnations are the personalities whose lives and character inspire millions of men and women universally.

Persons and principles are both necessary; they are never in conflict. One leads to the other like ice and water, bird and nest. In the normal state of mind we establish a relationship with the person. And while we develop spiritually, the principles sustain us through our faith and conviction. An elephant has two sets of teeth, one set for show and the other set for chewing the food. The Upanishads declare that the supreme reality manifests itself in two ways, with form and without form. Thus it will be observed that both persons and principles are necessary for the realization of spiritual truths.

A Religion that can Satisfy the Modern Seeker

The modern age is an age of science in which the human mind has been dominated by a mechanistic outlook. Due to scientific and technological developments, the distance between nations has been reduced, and the world has become smaller. As a consequence, men have been brought into closer contact, politically, socially, and culturally. It is quite natural, therefore, for a man to compare his social and behavioural patterns with those of other nations. When he does so, he finds some things common but many things different and strange.

This need for comparison also arises because the modern mind wants to find explanations based on reason. When man tries to understand some of his own beliefs, particularly in the domain of religion, and is unable to get satisfactory explanations, he feels a need to study other religions and the explanations given by them. There are, however, people whose first reaction is that the other views are strange and alien, and therefore they have a tendency to avoid them. On the other hand, some may like to investigate other religions. They feel that though a new idea may be strange, yet it is human, kindred, and potentially one's own. They may be able to learn from it. Thus men, through reason, modern science and technology, are discovering the common features in their thinking processes and behavioural patterns.

The soul of the scientific method is reason and experience, and not mere faith. Judged by this standard, many religions, as preached from the pulpit, are found to be unsatisfactory. The human need formerly filled by prayer, religious guidance and so on is taken over by psychoanalysis these days. Society or community takes the place of a personal deity. In modern times such noble impulses as love of one's neighbour and unselfish service find their outlet in institutionalized philanthropic and charitable works.

Another attraction of the modern age is that the new discoveries of science and technology are at least partially able to satisfy man's desire for creature comforts. It is felt that most of the problems of life can be handled without the knowledge of God, soul, and immortality. Supposedly, one does not need to apply religious knowledge to solve the problems of life.

For all these reasons and more, religion, as it has been understood, is presently at a discount. The average educated person today is not found to be religious, though many people have vague religious thoughts and feelings which they are unable to explain. While people in the Middle Ages had an anchor in their life through faith in God, in modern times people seem to have drifted away from this point of stability, and as a result an ever increasing number seem to end up on the psychiatrist's couch.

In spite of all this, we find that religious aspirations cannot be eradicated. Cults are multiplying everyday. There is a huge demand for mystical books in order to pacify the human soul. This is because there is a deep-rooted hankering for religious experience in man. It arises from his own

nature and has very little to do with his earthly environment. It seems as if man is a celestial tree planted on earth, for this search after the highest is in his inner constitution; he is trying to fulfil this urge with all his inner capacities, mental and spiritual tendencies, and with the help of all the conveniences that have been placed at his disposal.

According to Hindu mystics, the world process is sustained by two forces: one is called Pravritti (desire for worldly prosperity) and the other is termed Nivritti (desire for liberation). Even the desire for worldly prosperity must be controlled by spiritual laws or it creates chaos, confusion, wars, and destruction.

Indeed, man is like the prodigal son of the Biblical story. He may have all possible worldly pleasures and comforts, and yet some time or other he discovers that earthly life is short-lived. He then proclaims, "What shall I do with these earthly possessions if I am doomed to die?"—and thus goes in search of immortality and eternal life. For instance, Lord Buddha, before enlightenment, discovered the changes which the human being has to go through, such as birth, growth, decay, old age, and death. He then showed to mankind the way to attain eternal peace, joy, and enlightenment through detachment.

Man has a body and senses which seek satisfaction in material pleasures, a mind which seeks contemplation in science and art, and a heart which longs after the spiritual. While on the deathbed, every rational man must ask, "Is this the end? What is beyond?" It is this inquiry into the beyond rising from the heart which distinguishes man from animal. He seeks the permanent beyond all changes, and this search can only be satisfied by religion. Science studies only the outer life; psychology studies only the fringes of the mind; but the study of religion reaches that which is deep and sublime in man.

Animals and uncultured men derive their pleasure from the senses, while educated men get it from art, science, and philosophy; and the spiritual man from the spirit within. The test of religion is in the attainment of highest bliss and freedom, which is an automatic outcome of the communion with one's highest nature. Vedanta speaks of God as the embodiment of freedom and the master of nature; and through the control of his passions and desires, man achieves not only union with God but also freedom and self-mastery.

The essence of religion is eternal Truth, though its form changes from time to time. Dogmas, creeds, modes of worship, rituals and mythologies, through which the eternal religious truths are conveyed by teachers and scriptures, are secondary. The non-essentials, however, have to be given the value they deserve. The kernel and the husk are both essential for the corn. But in the ultimate analysis, the kernel has to be separated from the husk before it is ready for consumption. Similarly, the non-essentials of religion, which change from time to time, must eventually be transcended, leaving the central truths which are eternal.

Although the scope and aim of religion is to realize the real nature of man, the universe, and the ultimate Reality which controls man and nature, the leaders of religion have been quarrelling for a long time about its validity and basis. Some religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, speak of their historicity. They claim that their prophets are historical persons whose words are the standard of truth. The dogmas, creeds, and rituals of such religions are based upon interpretation of the prophet's words. True religion, on the other hand, is based on eternal laws, not created by man. The Indian Rishis, through their spiritual penetration, discovered those laws; first, through moral and

ethical life, and then through meditation. These eternal laws synthesize God, soul, and the world; and because the Rishis demonstrated these impersonal truths in their own lives, we revere them.

And it is this type of scientific exploration which will attract man today; for the modern mind needs a religion which will satisfy reason and be based on experience. That is the demand of the age in which we live. We should always keep this test in our mind. Truth is not the monopoly of a particular person or group of persons. The science of yoga emphasizes that truth must be pursued by all. If there is a God, we should all be able to realize Him. Realization is real religion. By merely shouting or chanting the name of God we will not be able to perceive Him. We may believe in all the churches and places of worship, read all the scriptures, and be baptized with all the holy waters of the world, but all this would be of little avail without actual perception of God. Without this vision, one might as well be an atheist.

We study the scriptures because they are based on experience and indicate the way. The validity of actual experience in religion is greater than the validity of science. In addition to reason and scriptural authority, one's own experience gives one the inner conviction which science alone cannot provide. But religious beliefs based purely on the intellect will decay like a bouquet of flowers. Religion does not come into experience by mere intellectual reasoning.

But then, what about religious cosmology? How far does that agree with experience? Science and religion are seen in conflict when they describe the process of creation. The Biblical story of creation was in direct contradiction to Darwin's theory of evolution, and, as a result, religion was discredited. In reaction to this, the church opposed science. Of course, whether the sun is going around the earth or the earth is revolving around the sun matters very little as far as the attainment of inner peace is concerned; Christ laid the foundations of Christianity at a time when people believed that the sun went around the earth. Sri Krishna, Socrates, and Plato gave humanity tremendous truths which have eternal validity, though modern science was not even born then.

The Vedantic view of creation is not opposed to that of modern science. According to Vedanta, there is no absolute creation. The design theory is a childish explanation of creation. The postulate that the nose is created by God so that the spectacles may be placed on it is ridiculous. It makes God an architect dependent on the world. The design theory may be good for teaching beginners about God's power and glory, but it cannot stand the test of reason. Vedanta speaks of evolution based on involution from one Supreme Reality, whose manifestations are seen in causal, subtle, and gross forms, like the tree and the seed. Kapila, the founder of the Sankhya philosophy, saw ages ago that there was no absolute destruction in nature, but only change. In creation, cause becomes the effect; and in dissolution, the effect goes back to the cause. A machine, when it degenerates, goes back to the scrap-iron state. The universe is eternal in either gross, subtle, or causal form, for the causal comes forth again and again as the subtle and then gross. We cannot add or take away even one ounce of energy from the totality of the universe.

It follows from this that the concepts of time and space have neither beginning nor end. If we try to think of a limit to time and space, or when time and space began, we will have to think of time and space as beforehand; that is, we are trying to discover the time and place in which time and space began, which is illogical. As such, time and space are infinite and eternal. Thus they are an aspect of God. Time, space, and causation come from Him and ultimately merge in Him.

Matter and force are the two entities which bring forth the process of creation. The primal matter

(Akasha) and the primal force (Prana) acting upon each other create forms, and at the end of the cycle, when the gross merges into the subtle, and the subtle into the causal, the primal matter remains embedded in the primal Prana. At the end of the cycle, all material forms are ultimately reduced to undifferentiated Akasha. This Akasha remains involved in Prana. They remain mixed together in fine forms in a state of dissolution—not annihilation. When the new cycle begins, creation appears to evolve in reverse process: subtle to gross. Just as physical bodies can be explained by Darwin's theory of evolution, these subtler and superfine causal manifestations can be explained through the science of intuition, which only religion can give.

As can be seen from this, God is the manifestor, not the creator. In and through the universe God exists. He manifests Himself as the universe. It is a projection of His cosmic mind. As to how He manifests, it is said in the Mundaka Upanishad: “As a spider spreads and withdraws its thread, as on the earth grow the herbs, and as from the living man issues out hair on the head and body, so out of the Immutable does the universe emerge here.”¹

The external aspect of thought is word. The names and forms are inseparable from the word. St. John begins his Gospel in this profound way: “In the beginning was the word.”² This word is Om of the Vedas. The Absolute (God) manifests Itself as this universe through time, space, and causation. Why and how? Vedanta calls it Maya. Our mind and reason, being part of it, cannot explain it fully.

Vedanta describes Reality as: “Sarvam khalvidam brahma—all this is verily Brahman.”³ All that is seen through the sense organs, felt in the mind and heart, and experienced through intuition is that One Reality called God. This explanation of religion satisfies not only reason and science, but also faith.

Religion and Human Fellowship

The true basis for lasting peace is human fellowship. It creates mutual understanding and goodwill. Peace has always been the cherished goal of civilized human society. All of the major world religions speak of love and fellow-feeling for our neighbors. Some of them analyze the philosophy of love in all its aspects, while others only hint at them. Only a small minority of the followers of these principles understand what is involved in their practice. A materialistic outlook on life has made us very much self-centered. Naturally, fellow-feeling in its real sense and this kind of selfishness do not go hand in hand. To understand the subject of fellow-feeling is a crying need of the world at present, because peace and world harmony depend on it. Insecurity and fear, which are the inevitable results of the lack of fellow-feeling, paralyze all constructive work. We came out of World War II a relatively short time ago. Minor wars have ensued since then. Devastation, poverty, and suffering are rampant in various parts of the world today. We are now faced with the possibility of atomic warfare and destruction. Any madman or nation can easily supply the spark which may explode the world. Are human beings so cursed that they cannot live peacefully? Different methods to achieve peace have been tried throughout history but most of them have failed. If we could use but a fraction of the resources which we have been spending on war for investigating our real nature and finding the peace that comes out of such knowledge, we would find the solution to most of our problems. In the light of a true religious spirit, another genuine effort is worth making. With the help of modern science and technology we can quicken the process of understanding and not escalate the path to war.

We see that a vast majority of mankind has a hankering for peace. Judaism emphasizes charity and justice. Christianity speaks of the ideal of peace on earth and goodwill among men. Hinduism considers the whole world as a big family. The whole purpose of ethics is to eliminate friction and promote fellow-feeling. Various efforts have been made throughout history. Human beings have tried to experience peace through the idea of one God. At the same time they have also accepted the rule of dictators, such as Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler. All of them desired to conquer the whole world and establish their own version of peace. But their aspirations died with them. The British Empire and the Commonwealth of Nations had some such ideal, although with different administrative techniques. That also was not a success. Many other efforts to eliminate war once and for all have been made, for example, through the balance of power concept which influenced European politics. Sometimes the very effort to preserve the balance has upset it. A kind of armed neutrality was also tried by the use of power blocs (Iron Curtain nations, Common Market nations, etc.). The idea remains, only the names change. Another method, which humanity tried after World War I, was the concept of a Court of International Justice. However, that also failed to stop wars; false patriotism and human passions proved too strong. The League of Nations became a cockpit of power politics. The tiger was allowed to devour the lamb of peace. Then came the United Nations. We are now tempted to believe that the previous institutions were superior to the present one. The

same devious power politics is present, contributing to unending political, economic and social problems. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that God laughs twice—once when a doctor says, “I will cure the patient,” and the second time when two brothers quarrel over a piece of land.¹

The success of democratic ideas, which have a capacity to bring about peace, depends upon the goodness of the common man. Wars have been the result of greed and lust—of kings, dictators, and even of democratic organizations. The common people have tremendous potential good in them. That goodness has not been brought out thus far in the free plane of action. Instead, war is thought to be a biological and psychological necessity. The growth of commerce and business has also served as a stimulant for war through too much rivalry and competition in trading without enough cooperation.

Religion claims that it has always stood for peace. Religion teaches man to control his lower instincts, replacing them with love, friendship, kindness, charity, and goodwill. Nevertheless, many times in the course of history, we find that the claim of one religion to be the universal religion has only caused bloodshed and atrocities. In modern times, preachers of religion are seen to play the role of politicians, inflaming one group against the other. At the same time, they move in society as preachers. The religious leaders, who are expected to bring peace, engage themselves in blessing weapons and armies. It is because of this that there is a tremendous distrust of religion and its methods. The United Nations has a brief religious ceremony before the daily work commences. The members come together, but their prayers are only skin-deep. There is no real desire to establish peace in the world, so that in spite of the millions of dollars spent and the many representatives sent there to bring about peace and understanding, peace is almost unattainable for the modern world.

Therefore, the question is asked again and again by mankind whether war is inevitable. The answer is both “yes” and “no.” It depends upon human nature. Lust, greed, passion, and anger are the real causes of all the disturbances in the individual's life, in family life, and in the national and international life. Frictions are the results of actions and thoughts. Lust and greed are not gifts of God, but are created by the human environment and by one's inner propensities. They can be changed through education, prayer, and meditation. Just as aspirin temporarily cures a headache, so does expediency temporarily put off war. But it does not stop it. When we speak of change through education, we are referring to some fundamental truths of the human soul—the purpose of its evolution and destiny, its relation to the universe and God, etc. It is, no doubt, a slow process, but there is no other way. True education belongs to the realm of supersensuous precepts, which can be understood by insight not by reason alone. This is called spiritual education. The malady is spiritual, and therefore the cure must also be spiritual.

Economic, political, and social confusions are symptoms of a deep-seated spiritual illness. Mere ethical programs will not cure the disease. Many statesmen are ethical, but they end with enlightened self-interest instead of self enlightenment. Ethics without religion is like the brotherhood of man without the Fatherhood of God. Religion without ethics is the Fatherhood of God without the brotherhood of man. Economics, politics, and ethics are only the means to the end. They can never be an end in themselves. The goal is total freedom of man from the bondage of attachment, selfishness, narrowness and all other limitations. This is a religious problem and not a socio-political one. Any method based on dogmatism in religion, such as the concept of a personal God, the belief in only one exclusive path to salvation, excessive missionary zeal, and various forms of bigotry and fanaticism will be found to be inadequate and will always fail. Limitation of outlook in religion also creates

other problems, such as belief in dualism, and belief in salvation only in heaven. Therefore, a new religious orientation is necessary.

Advaita or non-dualism, though confined to a few bold thinkers and sannyasins, is capable of overcoming all problems in religion. It must become the property of the masses. The salient features of Advaita are belief that the human being is essentially pure and perfect (shuddha, buddha, mukta) and is beyond time, space, and causation (desha, kala, nimitta). Ignorance has created these limitations and words as a veil. The human being is trying to remove this veil in order to go beyond the five sheaths covering the pure soul (annamaya kosha—gross physical covering; pranamaya kosha—sheath of vital energy; manomaya kosha—mental sheath; vijnanamaya kosha—sheath of intellect; anandamaya kosha—blissful sheath). It also means creating more perfect instruments out of the body, senses and mind. Man goes through different stages of evolution from tamas (inertia) to rajas (dynamism) to sattva (cooperation and consecration). The individual spirit or Atman within man is different from body and mind. It is immortal, free, and ever-illuminated. The Atman is the eternal part of man.

In trying to find out harmony, we should not emphasize any particular stage but always the goal. Belonging to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, or other religions, or undergoing experiences of wealth or poverty, health or disease, etc., are all different stages through which human beings pass. But the goal is the knowledge of the soul's indestructibility and immortality. This knowledge will destroy fear and secretiveness.

This world is a spiritual entity. Waves and foam are aspects of the self-same ocean. As we change and develop a proper perspective, we will see that the world will also change. The less-illuminated see hell. The righteous see heaven. But the fully-illuminated see God and His Spirit everywhere. God is a non-dual Spirit. He is pure consciousness. The personal God is a manifestation of that non-dual Reality—the One-without-a-second, the Antaryami. The Incarnations are all symbols. In and through them, we worship the infinite spirit. The purpose of worship is to attain to that non-duality where there is complete absorption and not the slightest differentiation. Religion plays an important part in the harmony and peace being sought by the world. Attainment of religious harmony is followed by harmony in politics, sociology, and economics. We prepare ourselves for harmony by following the methods of spiritual practice. Religions are not the goal but are so many paths, radii of the circle. Our attention should be to the centre, God, through deepening our spiritual consciousness. We should have respect and reverence for all religions while maintaining our chosen one. We should read other scriptures, understand the lives and teachings of the prophets of other religions. Theological seminars and ecumenical discussions will then bring warmth and understanding. The essential problem is the change in our mode of thinking. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, “Tie the knowledge of Advaita at the corner of your garment and then do whatever you like (i.e., there will be no tendency to do anything wrong).”²

In the past, multiplicity and differences were emphasized. Science is now revealing a new world of non-duality. The deepest spiritual experiences will remove all barriers. Let non-duality be the central feature of religion education, economics, and politics in the future. If a large number of people realize this truth and apply it in their daily life, there will be a great change of heart in the world, and peace and fellowship will emerge.

The Ideal of A Universal Religion

I. WHY CONFLICT AMONG RELIGIONS?

Like political and economic ideologies, religion, too, creates differences among people. However, if we are open-minded and tolerant, honest differences based on analysis and reasoning can stimulate healthy growth, and we can learn from one another. In order for us to keep our intellectual abilities and attitudes open, it is essential that we follow our own path steadfastly. From time to time in history, differences have not been settled through honest thinking and have become bitter. People have become fanatical, and conflicts have become deep-rooted and paved the way to war. In the past there have been many religious wars, such as the Thirty Years War, which was fought in Germany to decide whether Catholicism or Protestantism was true. Numerous other religious wars such as the Crusades, the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, and the wars between the Jews and the Arabs, can be recalled. Some people believe that secularism would be a proper antidote for wars spurred by religious bigotry.

Religious conflicts are paradoxical, and their causes elude the sincere inquirer who, following the path of reason, is unable to understand the quarrels that go on in the name of religion. Most religions preach the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, and yet old ideas of tribal religion such as the chosen people of God, are very difficult to overcome. Again, though most religions preach the dignity of man, peace, and goodwill, a great deal of hatred, violence, jealousy, and condemnation can be seen. Religious wars are not things of the past; they are very much in evidence even now. Perhaps, in the name of religion, even worse passions are let loose now than in the past.

Frequently, political and economic factors rather than religious principles have been the root cause of so-called religious wars. Religion is often used as an excuse for crusades, expansion of trade, and acquisition of political power. In the past 300 years, such patently non-religious factors as the discovery of minerals and oil, control over the Suez Canal, etc. have been used to gain economic advantage and political supremacy. But religious differences are not entirely blameless; they supplied the fuel to foster the fire of misunderstanding. Religious wars, real or apparent, are inexplicable, because religion has tremendous potential to bring about peace and goodwill as well as human development, if only religious principles are properly understood and practised.

II. PHILOSOPHY, MYTHOLOGY, RITUALS

Three essential components of religion are: philosophy, mythology and ritual. These three are all-important in the early stages of man's development. Philosophy forms the essence, supplying the basic principles and foundation of every religion. Such terms as God, Incarnation, Creator, immortality and

others are explained to the individual through the use of philosophy and reason.

Mythology is philosophy made concrete. Abstract principles are exemplified through stories of godly men and supernatural beings. Rituals concretize the philosophical principles and myths still further through the use of ceremonial forms and physical attitudes (mudras). In addition, various objects such as incense, flowers, lights and music are employed, which will appeal to the senses and thereby enable the individual to concentrate his mind and to experience a deeper sympathy with God's creation. Mythology and rituals delineate external values, while philosophy takes care of inner ideas and principles.

Rituals and myths have greatly enriched religion. Many outstanding works of art and literature—both in the East and the West—testify to this. The Sistine Chapel, Michaelangelo's sculptures, Dante's Divine Comedy, Milton's Paradise Lost, the magnificent caves of Ajanta and Ellora, the huge rock-cut temples of South India with their richly beautiful images and carvings, the classical epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata; all have contributed towards the remodelling of the human being from his base, animalistic outlook on life to the attainment of divine awareness. Rituals and myths are important for awakening the inner life of the human being. Mythology stirs the imagination, thereby intensifying the love of God. Lights, music and similar articles allow man to concentrate the scattered forces of his body and mind, for the finite mind needs to concentrate on symbols with which to grasp the Infinite. Concrete symbols call forth mental concepts. How many ideas, for example, are embodied in the images of the cross, the crescent, the star of David and the Om!

Occasionally, reformers in all religions have tried unsuccessfully to abolish symbols and ritualistic forms, but they slowly creep in again through the back door. Lord Buddha discarded all symbols and forms, but followers in later centuries were unable to grasp his teachings. They installed Buddha's image in temples and adopted myriads of rituals and ceremonial forms. Modern Buddhism is filled with ritualistic temple worship. The basic philosophy taught by Lord Buddha, which was the true foundation of Buddhism, has been almost totally forgotten. Islamic prayers are devoid of the ritualistic worship of images. History has recorded that throughout the world, the followers of Islam have destroyed many beautiful temples and images in support of this doctrine. But the use of other images and symbols have found their way in. A mosque is in a sense, an image of God. The Kaaba (Black Stone) in Mecca is the most sacred image of God, which the pilgrims are enjoined to kiss. They are asked to draw water from the well of Zem Zem, which cleanses all sins. Devout Muslims are expected to visit the tombs of the saints and martyrs. Similarly, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Bible and the church—with its cruciform structure—become symbols for God and Christ. With good reason, philosophy, mythology and ritualism are common in all religions.

The use of philosophy, mythology and ritual purifies the soul and creates love for God. When we see people becoming pure and noble through the practice of rituals along with the inspiration of myths and philosophy, who would like to condemn these forms? The influence of all three has produced great saints, prophets and God-men—Christ, St. Francis, Sri Ramakrishna and others. Whenever any of these three get discarded, the result is dryness of the human heart. Without symbols, religion becomes coldly intellectual and uninspiring. While rituals and myths are necessary before the mind is ready for higher meditation, they are transcended once the higher truths are realized. Human society becomes glorious when individuals, with the aid of these three, discover inner purity and goodness.

We should follow those practices and ceremonies which are enjoined by our own religion and yet

respect the forms developed by other religions, for they have got a common basis. That the human soul yearns, sometimes in spite of appearances to the contrary, to find out the common factors in all religions is an observed fact. God, Who is sometimes called Father, sometimes Mother, sometimes Friend and sometimes Lord, represents the most important common base in all religions. We all are the children of Him Who is our Father, Mother, Friend and Lord.

III. AGREEMENTS AND DIFFERENCES AMONG RELIGIONS

In order to obtain a clear perspective of religious conflict and to examine the prospect of religious harmony, one has to first study the areas of agreement and disagreement among the various religions. More specifically, the questions to study are: (1) What are the common features of the various religions? (2) In what essential aspects do the religions differ? A study of these questions will enable us to consider the more basic question of whether there should be a plurality of religions or one universal religion. The three components of religion mentioned above, namely, philosophy, mythology, and rituals, can provide us with a helpful framework for probing these questions.

It is perhaps safe to say that most religions agree on broad principles, but differ only in minor details of rituals and symbols. Several basic questions that have been dealt with in most major religions of the world will now be briefly examined.

1. Existence of God. There is almost unanimous agreement about the existence of God in most religions. While some religions assert that there is no God or Intelligent Principle behind the physical universe, the majority of religions believe in the existence of God with such blessed qualities as omnipotence and omnipresence. Some religions also assert that God is compassionate and answers prayers.

2. Existence of Soul. While most religions postulate the existence of an individual soul, there are disagreements on its nature and its relationship with God. Some say that the soul is independent of the body. Some religious schools of thought believe that the soul and God are distinctly separate entities. According to Advaita Vedanta, the soul and God are essentially one, the duality being an apparent and inexplicable phenomenon. In some religions, the soul is believed to be suffering at the present time, and the soul will have to wait until death of the body for its own liberation. The differences among various religions on this question are apparently irreconcilable.

3. Original Perfection of the Soul. According to Vedanta, there is only one ultimate reality called Brahman or Atman. That reality is perfect, complete, eternal, and immutable. Though Brahman is by nature perfect, imperfection is superimposed on it due to ignorance. A person looking at a rope mistakes it for a snake due to ignorance. There is no snake at all, but the false impression arises out of misapprehension of the sense organs. Other religions like Christianity, for example, assert that man is imperfect and sinful because the soul's imperfection is real, whereas according to Vedanta, the imperfection is only apparent.

4. Redemption of the Soul. There is quite a variety of views concerning the loss of perfection of the soul and its eventual restoration. However, there are two factors that are common to all religions. These are human effort and divine grace. All religions believe that human effort is essential and that God's grace follows human endeavour. Both human effort and divine grace are essential, according to

all religions, for the realization of perfection of the soul.

5. Transcendental Nature of Religious Experience. Most religions agree on the transcendental nature of religious experiences. Development of mental, as well as intuitive, faculties is considered essential in most religions for the attainment of the transcendental experience of the highest reality. The experiences of Christ, of Buddha, and of the Rishis of yore have formed the foundations of the scriptures of various religions. Accounts of how these and other holy souls got the transcendental experiences have been recorded in the scriptures of the world.

6. Reverence for Prophets and Saints. All religions have spoken highly of their prophets and saints. Personalities like Krishna, Moses, Christ, Buddha, Mohammed and others are revered in the scriptures of the respective religions because in these personalities the manifestation of God is clearly seen. They are deemed to have spoken in and through God. But when it comes to showing respect and reverence to prophets and saints of other religions, a remarkable lack of broadmindedness is in evidence.

7. Reverence for the Holy Scriptures and the Name of God. Every religion holds the name of God in the highest esteem. In Hinduism, God and His names are deemed to be identical. The scriptures of the various religions of the world contain the accounts of the lives, experiences, and teachings of prophets. These teachings are believed to be based on direct revelations. The ultimate ideal of perfection and exhortations to realize this inherent perfection are important parts of the various scriptures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ asserted: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”¹ A Rishi in the Svetasvatara Upanishad declares:

May the sons of Immortal Bliss hearken
to Me—even they who occupy celestial
regions!²

Like the names of God, scriptures, too, are held in the highest esteem in all the religions. As a consequence of this feature, religious books are revered and are put in place of God, so much so that religious books have come to the forefront of religion and God has gone into the background!

As can be seen from the above analysis, points of agreement among religions are so many that one wonders why there should be religious conflicts at all. Deeper reflection indicates that though most religions agree in their philosophical principles, disagreements arise mostly when symbols and rituals are emphasized. As seen earlier, myths and rituals are the symbolic aspects of religion, and there is bound to be disagreement and divergence in symbols among religions. When myths and rituals rather than principles and deeper truths are emphasized out of all proportion, and when the symbols are taken for real and truths are forgotten, differences among religions crop up, magnify, and eventually lead to hatred and war. It is very important to remember that all religions deal with symbols only as vehicles for conveying truths that are otherwise ineffable.

IV. SHOULD THERE BE MANY RELIGIONS?

The Vedantic view is that there will always be many religions and that they should remain different, because all religions eventually lead their followers to the same ultimate goal:

Persons following different paths straight or crooked—according as they consider that this path is best or that one is proper due to the difference in temperaments, reach Thee alone just as rivers enter the ocean.³

So long as there is variety in the world, there will be different tastes, and this freedom of making a choice suited to one's needs must be available to everyone in the matter of religion as much as in other spheres of endeavour. Vedanta postulates unity at the transcendental level, but recognizes the inevitability of diversity at the phenomenal level. Standardization in the matter of religion is repugnant. One can't impose one type of action, or one type of mythology, or one type of thought on all people. Human beings enjoy diversity. Diversity of religions stimulates new thought and promotes growth. Over the ages, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam have enriched one another. We have seen that during the history of about 2,000 years of Christianity, all attempts at standardization have failed. First, there was division into two major groups, and now there are hundreds of denominations. Sects are bound to remain; they are harmless as long as they do not lead to narrow sectarianism. Everyone must ultimately evolve with the help of his or her own understanding of religion; one's relationship with God should also evolve gradually and culminate in the realization of perfection. Paths can be divergent, but the goal (God) remains immutable. Religion enables the human mind to evolve from truth to higher truth.

Each religion takes up certain aspects of the universal truth and preaches them through its doctrines. Thus the scope and functions of religions are necessarily different. Christianity, for example, emphasizes love of God and Judaism emphasizes charity and justice; Islam emphasizes power and brotherhood, whereas in Buddhism peace is the keynote. In Hinduism, however, the main emphasis is on renunciation. In the Hundred Verses on Renunciation, Bhartrhari has sung that one has to renounce the world for the sake of the Self. Renunciation is the one principal theme in all the Upanishads:

All this—whatsoever moves on the earth—
should be covered by the Lord. Protect
yourself through that detachment. Do not
covet anybody's wealth.⁴

Various religions of the world provide different paths to commune with the same ultimate reality. It is like different groups of voyagers going to the ocean with different vessels of various sizes and shapes, without in any way affecting the integrity of the ocean. No one can limit God's nature, nor exhaust it; can an ant ever exhaust a sugar hill? Prophets are like big ants; they reveal what can be understood by their followers. But the teachings of prophets are conditioned by time, space, and socio-cultural environment. Thus we find that a multiplicity of religions is inevitable, but the religions are mutually complementary and not contradictory. The great religions of the world will continue to flourish and inspire their practitioners to realize the ultimate reality in their own way.

V. UNIVERSAL RELIGION

There is an increasing yearning for a world religion or a universal religion in our present age. Science has shrunk the world and brought the different countries closer together. The idea of a world government is often brought up. Swami Vivekananda expressed the relevance and urgency of this global approach thus:

One atom in this universe cannot move without dragging the whole world along with it. There cannot be any progress without the whole world following in the wake, and it is becoming everyday clearer that the solution of any problem can never be attained on racial, or national, or narrow grounds. Every idea has to become broad till it covers the whole world, every aspiration must go on increasing till it has engulfed the whole of humanity, nay, the whole of life, within its scope.⁵

When we speak of a world government, we do not mean that any particular system should be superimposed upon all nations. What is meant is that national governments should be built on the common foundation of mutual understanding, love, respect for fellow-beings, and respect for the word of God. National loyalties will remain. They are not necessarily harmful to world unity; they come into conflict with those of other nations only when national loyalties are based on narrow-minded self-interest to gain political and economic advantages. For a world government to become a reality, fanatical national interests will have to be subordinated to common human welfare. Similarly, universal religion does not mean that we enforce universal rituals or mythology; we cannot compel all men to accept Hindu rituals or Buddhist rituals or Christian communion, or prayers of the Muslims in the mosque. Attempts to enforce religious uniformity through coercion or cunning have failed in the past. Persuasion by missionaries has yielded at best superficial results.

Another idea that has been often proposed is eclecticism. This has been compared to a bouquet of flowers in which the flowers remain always separate. Eclecticism in religion lacks a unified and firm philosophical foundation and is, therefore, bound to disintegrate in time.

In one sense, universal religion has always existed and will continue to exist, in as much as the various religions are so many vistas leading to the Infinite. Even a primitive religion, which is condemned by the so-called followers of sophisticated religions, is also a grand vista of Truth, though it may appear to provide a backdoor view of ultimate reality. If we sincerely follow any one religion, purifying our hearts and minds through spiritual practices, each one of us will discover God and then we would have discovered the universal religion. One should follow one's own path sincerely and at the same time respect all the paths that are available to other seekers.

To obtain a glimpse of the universal religion that runs through all faiths, one has to look beneath the surface, beneath the forms and symbols, deep down into the soul; only then will we be able to see our own self in everyone and everything. Labels such as Hindu, Jew, Negro, Christian, etc. are an outer

casing. There exists a common humanity beneath these coverings. We have to experience it. There is only one God present in every manifestation.

All this is strung on Me, as rows of
gems on a string.⁶

VI. CONCLUSION

Vedanta calls for the recognition of all faiths as manifestations of one eternal religion. We have to accept variations in religions, especially in their symbolic and ritualistic aspects, for they are necessary to cater to the varied tastes and needs, just as many different restaurants are necessary and useful to cater to the demands of diverse palates. There should be no friction because everyone can pick one's choice depending upon one's own needs. All religions begin with rituals and myths but go beyond them towards the same final goal. While everyone should have his own preferred ideal, the lives of other prophets and the scriptures of other religions should also be read with reverence, since all glory stems from God's power only:

Whatever being there is: glorious,
prosperous or powerful, know that
to have sprung but from a spark of
My splendour.⁷

Even though the Lord of Lakshmi (Vishnu)
and the Lord of Sita (Rama) are one,
from the viewpoint of the Supreme
Brahman, my whole life (as long as I
am a devotee) is Rama, the lotus-
faced one.⁸

Sri Ramakrishna showed the unity of religions by his own spiritual practices. He practised the disciplines of various religions and experienced the same result. Swami Vivekananda spoke in the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 thus:

If the Parliament of Religions has
shown anything to the world it is
this: It has proved to the world
that holiness, purity, and charity
are not the exclusive possessions
of any church in the world, and
that every system has produced men
and women of the most exalted
character. In the face of this
evidence, if anybody dreams of the
exclusive survival of his own
religion and the destruction of

the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: “Help and not Fight,” “Assimilation and not Destruction,” “Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.”⁹

All religions must sooner or later realize and emphasize their common substratum. Then alone can religion act as a potent force to unify all mankind. This will help in creating harmony in politics, economics, and other fields of human endeavour and bring about peace on earth and goodwill among human beings.

The Future of Religions

During the past few centuries, religion has received hammer blows from many directions. Science has emphasized the reality of the sense-perceived world. Values such as God, soul, and the hereafter are considered either non-existent or unknowable. Sciences, such as psychology, which are investigating the inner workings of the human being, speak of the inner man as an aggregate of mental states and God as a projection of such a mental state. Technology is trying to create increasing creature comforts, and the accent is on material values. The physical and mental environment has not been conducive to spiritual growth. However, it seems that the worst blow is over. Two great wars in one generation have rudely shaken faith in the materialistic concept of life. Scientists like Einstein and psychoanalysts like Jung have pronounced that science without religion is blind. There is an increasing demand from people all over the world for knowledge and experience of the soul. So the trend for material values has now been changed.

But what is the nature of religion? Are we going to accept the same religion which did not satisfy the inquiring mind before? We must inquire into the deeper aspects of religion. Religion should not be based on dogmas or creeds or a body of beliefs but on experience. Such an experience should come from supersensuous and supramental levels. At the intuitive level man possesses the power to transcend the limitations of the senses and the mind. Instinctive experience can be transformed into intuitive experience with the help of reason and spiritual practices. Intuition can also be developed by a system of attunement, called yoga, based on self-control and contemplation. Thus we shall find that realization is the basis of religion. Such a religious experience will solve most of our individual, family, and social problems.

A human being has body, senses, and mind, and also a divine nature. He has a soul. While the body is satisfied by food, clothing, and shelter, the inner reality must commune with infinity and solve such questions as death and what lies beyond. The human being is a pilgrim to the shrine of knowledge. This knowledge has two fields, one the external, which deals with the knowledge of the sun and moon, atoms and molecules, trees and plants, etc., which is revealed with the help of science and technology. The other field, the internal, deals with spiritual truths and is not very easily revealed. The passions and emotions are mostly taken for granted and not studied or analyzed. But greed, lust, anger, and jealousy can be brought under control. This method of control is the subject matter of genuine religious discipline.

Freedom is what distinguishes a man from a machine. Machines such as locomotives and computers have no freedom, for they have to be operated by a human being. On the other hand, man is capable of complete freedom, although an instinctual man is another form of machine. All human adventures are based upon the spirit of freedom. We seek freedom through science by overcoming the limitations of time, space, and causation. There is no freedom in causation; all caused happenings

come to an end. Freedom is the goal of all worship. God is absolutely free. He is not the extracosmic God, but He is the spirit and consciousness, and he is both within and without. To remove the veil which obstructs our vision is the goal of spiritual discipline. If such a religion is taught, it has a tremendous influence on society. It binds people together in common fellowship, common sacrifice. A religious tie is more powerful than racial, linguistic or political affinity. It is conducive to social welfare. Selfishness, narrowness, greed, passion, etc., cannot be removed by science and technology. Their removal can be inspired by a spiritual ideal such as the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the oneness of the whole universe. Great world-movers were inspired by religion, the inner spirit that pervades the whole tangible and intangible universe. Religion builds up character and brings peace to the individual and the society. It also gives the highest meaning to life and brings full satisfaction. Pleasure through the senses can satisfy the animal instincts and desires in the underdeveloped man. Pleasures through the mind can satisfy refined individuals like poets, scientists, and philosophers. But the joy through spirit, which is the highest measurement of satisfaction and fulfillment, is experienced and preached by such world teachers as Christ, Sri Ramakrishna, Buddha, and the like. If we take religion away from the society what will remain but a forest of brutes? Under the influence of religion, world history has seen excellent development in art, literature, music, painting, sculpture, philanthropy, education, and even in politics, as seen in the Bill of Rights. The truths preached by religion are eternal. They deal with God, soul, nature, and the relationship with the Creator. These truths express themselves through organizations influenced by time and environment. They are written in the scriptures. These scriptures have to be properly interpreted so that the subsequent generations are guided in moulding their life and character. We thus find that we do not need a new religion; religious truths always exist. But they fall into the hands of unprepared, unworthy individuals who create a confusion of values through misinterpretation, and religion is wrongly accused of creating chaos in the society. Hundreds of creeds have been tried during the past several centuries in the name of religion. They have not solved our problems and never will. Treatment of the symptom is no substitute for treatment of the disease. No prophet has destroyed the old religion. What they have done is to reorient the old values with the proper interpretation befitting the changing society. These eternal values, which are universal, have to be first heard, then meditated upon with the help of reason, and finally assimilated in one's life to form the character. The religion of the future must seriously consider the following points:

1. Religion is a transcendental experience. It deals with the eternal relationship between God and the soul. Its utility cannot be measured by its effect on five minutes of earthly life.

2. Our duty should be influenced by religion and should culminate in moksha, complete freedom. Without the spiritual ideal, ethics, enlightened self-interest and economic security only serve as instruments for exploitation. The four stages of life speak of gradual preparation from the animal instinct to the divine consciousness. The human being discovers that he is the servant of humanity without any distinction of caste, creed, and religion.

3. Work and worship should be equally emphasized. Work without worship results in restlessness, worry, going about and doing good to none. It is only an aspiration for name, fame and power. Meditation without work ends in laziness, selfishness and self-deception. A bird has to have two wings with which he flies. The two aspects of Godhead are the one and the many, and the two methods of communion with God are meditation and work.

4. Religion must not contradict science and the scientific method. Scientific laws are also laws of

God applied to the psychophysical world. Religion must accept the laws of science such as evolution, cosmology, gravitation, etc. The scientific method is a help from God through reason and experimentation. Doubting our own conclusions, Vedanta utilizes *shruti*, the scriptures, *yukti*, reason, and *anubhava*, one's own experience based on these two. Vedantic reasoning is not discussion alone, it is also sadhana—the discipline through which each experience is tested and purified. Otherwise reasoning becomes mere rationalization. In Vedanta the scope of reasoning is negative, to tell us what is not true. When all non-truths are eliminated by reasoning, the ultimate truth reveals itself.

5. Moral basis of religion. The foundation of religion is moral discipline. Occult or non-genuine spiritual experiences are generally projections of the mind. They have brought the greatest discredit to true religion. A man in the name of religion cannot be selfish, greedy, or cruel. Future religion must emphasize goodness, purity, and universal justice without any reservation. Religion has been kept alive by saints, not by theologians or philosophers. The saints have cultivated and kept shining the principle of holiness. They are the living witnesses of God. Mere profession of religion will be futile. It will end with “my religion” and “my nation's religion” and not a universal religion.

6. Harmony of religions. Jealousy discredits faith. This is a universal truth. We should have a federation with mutual understanding as the ideal in every religion. The Hindu idea of harmony is expressed by Sri Krishna:

By whatsoever way men worship Me,
even so do I accept them; for, in
all ways, O Partha, men walk in My path.¹

One should be devoted to one's ideal. At the same time, see the same God present in all religions. Christians should worship Christ, the son of Mary, but see the same God in the Hindu temple. Universal religion teaches all its devotees to have faith in their form of God. But that very God is present in all religions through different names and different forms. There can be hundreds of points on the circumference of a circle but there is only one center. The time has come when we should have the reconstruction of the whole world on the solid foundation of the universal ideal of harmony in thought and action. Spiritual rehabilitation is a necessity of the present time, when the whole human race is passing through the danger of destruction. The world powers are confused by two different ideologies in handling sociopolitical forces. The world powers are supplying arms to quarrelling nations in the name of peace. Religion should be able to look at the world as a whole, not in terms of the interest of one against the interest of another. Otherwise, we shall only be giving lip service to the moral and ethical values which are so important in spiritual understanding. Ultimately it is not the political, economical crisis that is at the root of the problem but the moral and spiritual crisis. We may be able to fill the stomachs of the hungry with food, but we have failed miserably in giving hope and faith in universality and harmony. Religion can provide the vital faith, a song that all mankind can sing. In America the ideals of democracy and equality and respect for the rights of man kindled hope in the world in the past century. We have to keep it burning by bringing this ideal into the fields of science, religion, economics, and politics.

Who is a Real Seeker of God?

Sri Ramakrishna classified human beings into four classes. The first class was baddha, the bound souls. The second class was mumukshu, those individuals struggling for freedom. The third was mukta, those who had achieved their freedom, and the final class was nityamukta, those who were ever-free. He would compare them to four types of fish in the ocean. When the fisherman casts his net, one type of fish, who never worries about the fisherman's net, gets caught. The second type, who know through a feeling that the net is likely to come, try to jump but their strength is not adequate to get free from the bondage of the net, so ultimately they get caught also. The third type is like those who get the feeling of the coming of the net well in advance, so they jump and get free of the net. The fourth type is compared to the fish in the deep ocean, where the net does not come. The bound souls are like imprisoned individuals. They move round and round within their small cell of thought and action. They live in the dungeon of the five senses and whatever these senses bring to them. The majority of the people of the world fall in this category. They undergo unceasing suffering. A camel eats thorny grass and bleeds but eats thorny grass again. Worldly people feel uncomfortable in a spiritual environment, like worms that breed and thrive in filth but die in a pot of clean rice. They scoff at prayer and meditation. They dislike all spiritual and holy discussion and leave the spot, saying that they will wait for the boat on the bank of the river or look at the buildings around. A man may be visiting a church or temple, but that visit is mostly mechanical. At best it is a visit for health, wealth, power, or progeny, and not for God or devotion. Some do feel real emotion while reading a book, listening to a sermon, or in holy company, but they forget the whole impression when busy with daily duties. Many have pious wishes but no time for religious practices. They say, "Let me first organize my business and finish my children's education." Days, months, and years pass by; death is at hand, and the genuine religious search has not begun as yet.

Thus the life of a worldly-minded person goes on. He is born again, suffers, and dies again. But he too occasionally performs a good deed, prays in the church or temple, reads scriptures, or meets with a holy man. Gradually the hidden spiritual spark is kindled. He learns from experience about the unsubstantiality of the world and finds out the defects of human relationships. These lessons make a man introspective. He learns higher values of life and becomes a seeker of abiding truth.

A seeker of truth, mumukshu, has different levels. Though he has worldly desires and pursuits he is always attracted by something noble, valuable, and abiding.

Four types of virtuous men worship Me,
O Arjuna: the man in distress, the man
seeking knowledge, the man seeking
wealth and the man imbued with wisdom,
O Best of the Bharatas.¹

All these are good people. They all do seek God, but among them the jnani, the seeker of truth, is the best. At a certain stage of evolution the call of God becomes irresistible. Then he answers the call of Christ to, “Come, take up your cross and follow me.”² Patriotism, social service, pursuit of art, do not seem adequate. Such souls are rare.

Among thousands of men scarcely one strives
for perfection, and of those who strive and
succeed, scarcely one knows Me in truth.³

Another set of devotees are afflicted by sickness, “arta”. They take treatment from a physician, visit churches and temples, pray, and resort to all sorts of healers and therapies. They discover that a large amount of the body is controlled by the mind and many diseases, such as heart trouble, insomnia and arthritis, originate in the mind. Prayer and worship restore mental serenity and remove physical symptoms and this type of devotee is satisfied with this healing. But he forgets a very important thing—the disease comes back. Another devotee is called “artha arthi,” an aspirant after wealth and material success. Many religious organizations entertain such devotees, individuals who want to have occult powers. They treat such devotees as patients and enter into a flourishing business. Sometimes such teachers succeed in bringing about what the devotees aspire for, but such success is more accidental than scientific. In all these cases we must remember that there is a general law called unselfishness, to remain unselfish. Sin is the cause of suffering, and selfishness is sin. Selfishness is alienation from the universal life. Life is one. It looks like it is separate but it is interrelated. A selfish man lives an individualistic life centered on his own self and therefore comes into conflict with other men and has friction and pain like a bone dislocated from the socket or a wheel from the axle. Religion teaches us to be ethical, honest, and moral. Honesty is the best policy not only in business but in any profession. Those who follow this law are successful everywhere. The next type of devotee is called “jijnasu.” When a moral and ethical life under the guidance of the teacher and the scriptures is lived, religious feelings are awakened and a human being becomes inquisitive. He looks around and visits different temples and reads about different religions such as Zen, yoga, Vedanta, Theosophy, anthroposophy, Divine Science, or spiritualism, but never sticks to one. This is called superficial inquiry. At best it is only an intellectual gathering of facts. He may derive a temporary satisfaction, but the discontent comes back. The malady is not cured, it is suppressed for the time being.

The popular religion promises heaven up above with the expectation that one can reach such an imaginary place after death through a belief in certain dogmas, faith, prayer, philanthropy, or following moral laws. What do they expect to do in heaven? Perhaps meet with departed friends and relatives, enjoy a so-called eternal life with food and drinks, or ever or at best the company of angels. It is only an extension of earthly life. Hinduism accepts heaven and such other places for the departed souls but warns that after the results of meritorious actions are exhausted man has to come back to the earth.

Having enjoyed the vast world of heaven,
they return to the world of mortals on
the exhaustion of their merits; thus
abiding by the injunctions of the three

Vedas, desiring objects of desires they go and come.⁴

Thus they are entangled in coming and going from earth to heaven and back to earth. There is no freedom. The secret hankering of the soul is for total freedom. Heaven is an effect and cannot be everlasting.

A Brahmana should resort to renunciation after examining the worlds, acquired through karma, with the help of this maxim: “There is nothing (here) that is not the result of karma; so what is the need of (performing) karma?” For knowing that Reality he should go, with sacrificial faggots in hand, to a teacher, versed in the Vedas and absorbed in Brahman.⁵

All material places are impermanent. Even immortality in heaven is relative. The position of Creator also comes to an end at the end of the cycle. Thus the wheel of Samsara, birth and death, goes on. It may be in a higher or a lower world. Man is caught in the mesh of janma (birth), mrtyu (death), jara (old age), and vyadhi (sickness). Still, there is a great hanging-on to life. The inner voice asks for something permanent, immortal, and blissful.

This Self cannot be known through much study, nor through the intellect, nor through much hearing. It can be known through the Self alone that the aspirant prays to; this Self of that seeker reveals Its true nature.⁶

After all these experiences are gone through, both on earth and in heaven, a human being becomes a real seeker of God. The previous experiences are great teachers. They prepare him for the real desire and search after truth. What does such a seeker aspire for? He wants God and the eternal, not the extracosmic figure somewhere on top of a mountain or in heaven, but the pure Spirit, Sat-chit-ananda, accepted by all religions—eternal reality, with knowledge and bliss. Then the aspirant seeks the very source of knowledge by knowing whom the essence of everything is known. Sense pleasures no longer attract such an aspirant. He discovers that there is no real joy in the finite.

Eternal peace is for those—and not for others—who are discriminating and who realize in their hearts Him who—being the eternal among the ephemeral, the consciousness among the conscious—alone dispenses the desired objects to many.⁷

It is a state of understanding. It is a transcendence of the narrow, limited view of life and the

realization of the universal consciousness.

Having a clear-cut view of the goal, such a person follows different disciplines which are mostly inner. Other disciplines such as rituals, worship, charity, pilgrimages, and study are all outer disciplines. They are necessary for purification of the inner stuff in order to get one-pointed-ness of mind. The inner disciplines are prescribed by all faiths. Vedanta, for example, prescribes two very important disciplines in addition to others. One is called “viveka”, or discrimination between the unreal and the real. The real never changes. It is the underlying reality of the whole universe. The second discipline, “vairagya”, is the renunciation of the unreal. All selfishness is the cause of misery and suffering, so it should be abandoned. Whatever creates a narrow view of life, such as “my body,” “my family,” “my country” should be transcended by cultivating spiritual treasures such as sama (calmness), dama (self-control), uparati (self-withdrawal), titiksha (forbearance), samadhana (self-settledness), and sraddha (faith), and finally making one's self ready for complete freedom. The ideal has to be kept intact. It is a slow process, not achieved by sudden leaps and bounds. A water buffalo carrying a heavy load through a deep mire goes forward, always moves on with his eyes fixed on the dry ground ahead. So, also, a spiritual aspirant, having cleared all doubts, sets out on his journey, keeping the goal very clear, and moves on, regularly following the daily meditation, prayer and study, and leading an ethical and moral life. We pray for fulfilment of some desires. If they are not unselfish ones sought purely for the sake of a higher state of consciousness, they will bring unhappiness in the end. Holy company and solitude are two very powerful aids in building up the spiritual life.

These are some of the very important disciplines helpful for spiritual experiences. When followed they will bring simplicity of life, straightforwardness, love for truth, and purity. People who follow these disciplines are the real seekers of God and truth.

The Spiritual Significance of Death

The fact of death has been pondered over for thousands of years. Ever since man became self-conscious he has been asking three primary questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Where have I come from?
3. Where am I going?

These questions have been probed in all religions, and all have suitable occasions when the great mystery of death is contemplated through rituals, mythology, and philosophy. Such reflections on death, the complement to life, reveal new meanings and new perspectives.

Death is the most striking phenomenon in our experience. It is no respecter of persons. Whether man or woman, educated or uneducated, rich or poor, king or beggar, everyone is required to give up the body. Swami Vivekananda vividly expressed the fact of man's relationship to death:

Then, there is the tremendous fact of death. The whole world is going towards death; everything dies. All our progress, our vanities, our reforms, our luxuries, our wealth, our knowledge, have that one end—death. That is all that is certain. Cities come and go, empires rise and fall, planets break into pieces and crumble into dust, to be blown about by the atmospheres of other planets. Thus it has been going on from time without beginning. Death is the end of everything. Death is the end of life, of beauty, of wealth, of power, of virtue, too. Saints die and sinners die. Kings die and beggars die. They are all going to death, and yet this tremendous clinging on to life exists. Somehow, we do not know why, we cling to life; we cannot give it

up. And this is Maya.¹

When someone dies, particularly a young boy or girl, we ask this question again and again, “Why was he born at all? He was quite healthy, intelligent, a young man devoted to some useful work. Why has death carried him away?” In the case of an old person, we also feel that he or she has left us, and the question comes before us, “What is he doing now, where has he gone?” Everyone becomes thoughtful in the presence of death.

The validity of religion depends upon the meaning of death. Is there any hereafter? There is no meaning in praying for everlasting peace unless there is a continuation of existence after death. This question forms the central theme of the Katha Upanishad, where the student, Nachiketa, asks this question about life after death to the teacher, Death himself:

This doubt that arises, consequent on the death of a man—some saying, “It exists”, and others saying, “It does not exist”—

I would know this...²

We usually forget this question within a few days after somebody dies. A young man, living in the ecstasy of youthful enjoyment, does not want to think about death. An old man may refuse to think of it, like an ostrich putting its head in the sand of ignorance. But still the question returns. Someone dies and that poses the question afresh. We ourselves die in the end. A deep sense of fear overtakes us if we do not know the answer.

If people in general avoid inquiry about death, it is due to fear. They think the subject too grim for discussion. Many refuse to think of death, arguing that it is enough if they live their lives properly without asking what happens afterwards. But we must answer the question: how can our birth, our life and our actions have real significance without survival? How can we be sure that we are not wasting our time and energy unless we know that the fruits of our efforts here on earth will have meaning and validity, as well as helping us and our ancestors in the other world, the world beyond death?

We must admit that life as we know it, bound by birth and death, has no obvious meaning. Simply because we instinctively find interest in doing things does not mean that our mode of living is real. For thousands of years, man has accepted his practical structures for reality, certain ways of seeing and doing things, without questioning their validity. Science points out that our perceptions and the conclusions derived through them are often wrong. Things are not what they seem to be. Philosophers, poets, scientists and seers have corroborated this fact for ages. Therefore, may not our understanding of life also be mistaken? Because we happen to be in the majority on any particular opinion, it does not follow that our ideas are trustworthy.

We must therefore probe deep into life itself in order to understand it. And, in a way, by deepening this understanding of life we will understand death. Time and again we are reminded of the deeper meanings by poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow through his imposing expression of the thought:

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,

Various explanations have been given to this mystery of death:

1. Materialists and the modern scientists explain human life purely in terms of cells, glands, organs, etc., and they argue that oxygen is needed for keeping the cells alive. When the heart ceases to beat, blood cannot assimilate the oxygen. Cells composing vital organs die in millions. Organs disintegrate. The heart stops and the human being dies and disappears into nothingness. They argue that we should not waste our time worrying about the future. "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die." According to them, the thought of death retards our effort to acquire wealth and enjoyment. They argue that it is harmful to worry about such questions. Materialists can be ethical in their own way, but they follow the path of enlightened self-interest.

2. Some of the intellectual people of our age are agnostic. They say it is impossible to know the nature of soul and the hereafter. They avoid any enquiry about death because it is inevitable. It is bound to come, certainly, when our time comes. The remedy against the fear of death, according to them, is to lead a good life and keep a clear conscience, have a kind heart and friendly attitude to all. We should die in a better way and have immortality through good deeds. They advocate a stoic courage at the time of death.

3. The ancient Egyptians believed in a double. When the soul was hurt, the body was hurt. The soul hovered around the body, and when the body did not move, it was separated from life. The body was mummified and kept in a pyramid, and the soul came and hovered around it.

4. Among the Greeks there was great wisdom and understanding, but they could not harmonize death and life. Death cast the darkest shadow on their lives. Their worldly life was rich and full. They had developed a capacity for enjoyment and fun. Their passions were intense, their bodies and minds healthy and keen. Naturally, old age and the hour of death were very painful. Achilles said to Ulysses, "I would rather be a slave among the living than the king of death." The Greeks, however, believed in a spirit that survived the death of the body. This soul was a phantom, a shadow, a colourless duplicate of the man as he lived on earth.

5. The orthodox Christian view admits the immortality of man. Christ's resurrection proves immortality. Death is a punishment for the sinner, but the virtuous are rewarded with a permanent abode in heaven through the grace of Christ. A Christian believer should be happy at the thought of death. We die so that we die no more. This world is the land of dying, and the next the land of living. Death is a golden key that opens the door to eternity. Those whom the gods love die young. Christ said, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."⁴ Christians take these utterances in the literal sense. True Christians have faced death with courage. The early martyrs and Desert Fathers lived very hard and rigorous lives and faced death with joy.

6. The Hindu or Vedantic view is based on the knowledge of the nature of the body and soul. They are eternally separate, like matter and spirit. The test of spiritual growth is understanding this eternal separation of the soul from the body. What, then, is death to the Hindu? It is explained by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita:

As the indweller in the body experiences

childhood, youth and old age in the body,
he also passes on to another body. The
serene one is not affected thereby.⁵

The soul remains unaltered through childhood, boyhood, youth and old age, and, also, death. Death is just another change. After Sri Ramakrishna left the body, he appeared to the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, and showed her that he had only gone from one room to another.

This eternal soul is clothed with three bodies: the causal (Karana Sharira), the subtle (Sukshma Sharira) and the gross (Sthula Sharira). It is the assertion of Vedantic thinkers, based on experience, that the mind does not die with the disintegration of the physical body but that the soul departs intact with two inner bodies—the subtle and the causal. The impressions made upon the mind during several lives remain with the soul, and only the physical body is left behind. The soul takes bodily form again and again until it realizes its pristine glory through higher and higher experiences. It finally learns that it is unconnected with the body and that objective and subjective appearances are mere phantasms of the individualized soul.

Death, which is connected only with bodily existence, has two phases. It appears in different ways to the living and to the dying person. A living person forms an external picture of death. We think of it in its objective phase. The dying man loses consciousness of this world. He neither sees nor speaks, and is breathing laboriously. He appears to be suffering terribly. The final cessation of his breathing is called death. As regards the subjective phase of death as it is experienced by a dying person, the Vedantic scriptures proclaim that when a spiritually undeveloped soul separates from the body, it experiences all the shock, agony, and fear which such separation implies. On the other hand, when a spiritually developed soul departs, its passing is easy, smooth, and with serenity. There is complete absence of agony and fear. Even though the dying person appears unconscious outwardly, he is fully conscious inwardly and experiences the transition from the present life to the next life.

At the dying moment, the soul's entire life, in essence, passes before it as a quickly moving pictorial phenomenon. Certain tendencies and characteristics begin to assume preponderance. Coloured and influenced by them, the soul departs, and the nature of its departure is determined by these predominant tendencies and characteristics. If they are good, the passing is smooth and peaceful. If it is otherwise, it is unpleasant. An ignorant soul suffers because it resists the separation from the body to which it is attached. It drifts for a while and only later is able to find its way to a suitable plane of existence. Just as a tenant who has lived in a rented house for a long, long time resists leaving the house when notice is served by the landlord and suffers mental agony because of attachment, so the soul resists separation from the body and this world, with the result that death means agony and struggle. Finding itself taken away from all the familiar surroundings it knew and loved, it suffers great agony. Death means that kind of separation, and to those who have been much attached to life it must certainly be very painful. This attachment comes out of desire for enjoyment. It is based on the experience of pleasant sensations gained through the contact between the sense organs and their objects. Suffering has therefore been termed in Vedanta as a great teacher. During protracted illness, everything loses its flavour. The soul grows disappointed and disillusioned with the earthly life, and, thus, the mind is gradually prepared to withdraw.

It follows, therefore, that there are two types of people in the world: those who are prepared for death, fully believing that life is really a long preparation for death; and those who are not prepared

for death at all. Whenever affection becomes a bondage, it is undesirable. It is a common experience of daily life that when the family members cling together constantly it eventually becomes intolerable. Family reunions are very good as special occasions, but we could not stand them through all eternity. When we are perfected and, therefore, completely satisfied within, we do not need father, mother, son, wife, friends, etc. Such relationships then become meaningless. The perfect being does not need such relationships. Only in imperfection are such relationships possible.

One may say that the Vedantic teaching is strange in that we are told to prepare ourselves for death while we are living. Vedanta insists on our preparing ourselves for the experience of death. It teaches that we should do this by developing the proper condition of mind. Vedantic thought maintains that our state during and after death and our existence during our next incarnation will be determined by the predominant state of our consciousness and thought at the time of giving up the body. It follows, therefore, that while we are preparing ourselves for death with the proper attitude and discipline, we are really preparing for eternal life, discovering once and for all the eternal dimensions of our personality which is called the Atman in the Upanishads. It is beyond both life and death. For those who fail to prepare themselves, a great suffering and tragedy await them in spite of their wealth, pomp, power, erudition, and cunning.

Preparing our mind requires continuous cultivation and training. It should be made a vital part of life's plan by all. At least one period in life should be dedicated entirely to such spiritual culture. Preparation for death must be started long before we die. Years and years of effort should be devoted to it. Having discharged the duties and responsibilities of life, a man should dive deep in contemplation. He should penetrate the deeper layers of real life and find its true meaning. Rather than blame young people for their unrestrained life, we should censure the elders who are setting a bad example. If young people could see all around them older men and women who were the very embodiments of sincerity, love, and purity, they would feel inspired by their example. If even the later years of life are devoted to the quieting and purifying of our mind, to the spiritualization of thought and life, the greatest aim of life can be achieved. Then and then alone, death would represent not destruction but rather fulfillment.

Our present life has justification only to the extent that it succeeds in breaking bondage. The basic cause of bondage is ignorance. We rid ourselves of our attachments and cravings partly by satisfying them and learning the emptiness of such satisfaction and partly by reasoning, through which we become convinced of their emptiness.

The embodied soul goes on moving from incarnation to incarnation until it realizes that it requires no further experience, because it has discovered within itself everything to be known. Death contributes to this revolutionary experience called change, and so it is of vital importance. Life and death are two parts of a large scheme of existence and attainment. Death is indeed a withdrawal, a separation from the superficial life. Moreover, death has a tremendous spiritual value in that it reveals the transitoriness of the world and all material things, even of this beloved body. We learn the great lesson of detachment, and then we really seek for the Real behind all appearances.

Outline of the Hindu Religion and Philosophy

The word “Hindu” has come to us from the Greeks. They called the people living beyond the Indus River “Hindus”, and the name has come to be applied to both the people and their religion. A more correct name would be Sanatana Dharma (The Eternal Religion) or the Religion of the Vedas. The Hindus have accepted the Greek name, and so the words Hindu and Vedic are synonymous. This religion is professed by more than 500 million people living on the subcontinent and scattered throughout the world. It is one of the oldest religions of the world, Buddhism and Jainism being its offshoots. The Hindu spirit has influenced both the Asiatic and Western cultures throughout history. According to the Hindus, religion and philosophy are not diverse. Philosophy is the intellectual approach to truth and religion is the concrete discipline to experience the truth. While philosophy protects the seeker from the pitfalls of superstition, dogmatism and error, religion supplies the seeker with passion and the urge for truth. Philosophy without religion is a bundle of cold intellectual theories. Faith and reason meet harmoniously in higher experience. Hinduism emphasizes a higher power of mind called intuition which is cultivated through detachment, self-control, and concentration. Genuine intuition cannot and must not contradict reason. Religion is life, not mere dogma; realization, not mere belief. It is the direct perception of reality and its application, not mere emotional thrill. The spiritual disciplines enjoined by scriptures and teachers for the intuitive experience of the truth are sravana (hearing), manana (contemplation), and nididhyasana (experience). The test of truth is that the truth, when revealed through discipline, should be beyond contradiction and should bring well-being to all.

Hinduism has not been founded by any particular person or incarnation or book. It deals with universal laws most impersonal in content, justified by the experiences and lives of millions of illumined men and women throughout time. They discovered these laws through concentration, detachment, and self-control (yoga). The goal of Hindu teaching is abhyudaya (well-being here and now), and nihsreyasa (fulfillment and complete freedom)! The Vedas conclude that the universe is a spiritual entity identical with God. It is a projection of God in names and forms like the ocean and the waves, the spider and its web, the flute and its melody. The world is rooted in God, and the spirit, as it were, enters into material forms. The world is not unreal like the son of a barren woman. The world is real at a certain level. Beyond that level of experience the world vanishes into its cause. The Vedas are against materialistic interpretations of the universe. Hinduism calls this world “Maya”. Maya is a creative principle in the Absolute which projects the appearance of names and forms. Maya, with its power, hides the real nature of the Absolute, or God. In samadhi the illumined soul sees only non-duality. When he is aware of the world, he sees unity in diversity. The soul is a spiritual entity, an immaterial spirit. It is the reality behind this universe. Through ignorance the individual soul identifies itself with matter and feels individualized. It becomes a victim of hunger and thirst, birth and death, heaven and hell, and reincarnation. Through the theory of the law of karma

the phenomena of life and death and inequality are explained. Through the experiences of many births the individual soul becomes disillusioned and seeks freedom from samsara (birth and death). He then seeks the teacher from whom he receives instructions and spiritual discipline, and by practising the discipline, he steadfastly realizes that he is none other than the real Self.

God is the reality behind the universe. He is non-dual and is termed Sat (absolute existence), Chit (absolute knowledge), and Ananda (absolute bliss). Sat is that principle which makes objects appear as real, as in the case of the desert, which gives substance to the mirage. Chit is absolute consciousness. It manifests as empirical consciousness through the sense organs. Ananda is absolute bliss. The relative happiness the individual derives in the phenomenal world is a manifestation of that absolute happiness. From time to time God manifests as an Incarnation—as a Saviour. The highest spiritual truths are expressed through a man so that humanity can understand them. Such Incarnations can be many.

There are three views about the relationship between God, the universal soul, and man, the individual soul:

1. Dvaita (dualism): God, nature, and soul are different, yet there is a spiritual element in each soul. The individuality is retained after liberation but is transformed. The ordinary ego does not remain. When touched by the philosopher's stone, an ordinary sword is converted into a golden blade though it retains its shape. Similarly, an individual remains an individual but has a special relationship with God.

2. Vishishta Advaita (qualified non-dualism): There is a unity between God, souls, and the universe. This unity is with distinctions. The soul and the universe are modes of God. In the pomegranate fruit, the distinction between the shell and the seeds remains externally but all the seeds are part of the whole.

3. Advaita (non-dualism): God, souls, and the universe are identical. It is Maya or ignorance which creates the distinctions. When knowledge comes, the dual experience vanishes. What the ignorant calls diversity is non-duality to the wise. This is expressed through the Mahavakyas: "Thou art that. I am Brahman. This self is Brahman. Brahman is consciousness."

The distinctive feature of Hinduism is that the identity between the individual self and the cosmic Self that is preached through the scriptures and the illumined teachers has to be experienced by the student in his own life. The valid ways of this experience are scripture, reason, and experience. Dualism, qualified monism, and non-dualism are not contradictory. They are different stages of spiritual experience. They appear different from the standpoint of the body and the state of awareness. Realization necessarily brings joy, peace, and freedom.

The spiritual disciplines are called yoga. The four yogas, namely the path of knowledge, the path of devotion, the path of action, and the path of inner control, are based on the faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing, and concentration which are present in each human being. All efforts, properly followed, must end in realization of the highest state of consciousness. To know God is to be God. Man can be perfect and completely free from ignorance and the notion of individuality.

Hinduism preaches the harmony of religions. The truth is one; thinking people call the selfsame truth by various names. Each religion takes one aspect of the reality and spends its entire force in

embodying it. Religions quarrel because they sit tight on that one aspect, thinking that other aspects are false. Four cardinal principles of Hinduism are:

1. Divinity of the soul.
2. Unity of existence.
3. Non-duality of Godhead.
4. Harmony of religions.

Hinduism sees no conflict between man and man, man and nature, man and science, or man and the empirical world. Hindu teachers have given four values of life and four stages of development by which an individual is able to live in harmony with himself and with the rest of society. The four values are dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kama (desire), and moksha (liberation). The four stages of life, which a person is expected to go through, are brahmacharya (studentship), grahastha (householdership), vanaprastha (retirement), and sannyasa (renunciation).

Hindu philosophy is interwoven with Hindu religion so that both are made rich. This is called darshana (direct perception of the truth). The ultimate truth has to be experienced. It is the guide of daily life. The main doctrines revealed by darshana are:

1. There is One Reality—the first cause, non-dual, self-existent, uncaused principle. All else belongs to phenomena that are caused and have a beginning and an end. The world is empirically real but ultimately unreal.
2. The ultimate Reality is all-pervading, the ground and the essence of all things with names and forms. Nothing can exist independent of the Reality.
3. The Reality is immanent and transcendent. When seen through the gross and subtle senses it appears as the world; when seen directly, it appears as pure spirit.
4. The one Reality is the basis of the universe, which is Maya or Lila. Evolution and creation are supported by the Reality like man and his breath.

Religion agrees that the individual is a spiritual entity. Our actions are guided by past karma. There is an element of freedom given to us, but that freedom also comes from God. Man is the architect of his fate. Individuality is the result of ignorance. Man is trying to realize his true nature. Swadharma (following one's own path) is the discipline prescribed.

According to Hinduism the universe is an indivisible whole. There is no essential separation between mind and matter or God and man. Worlds of God, men, animals, vegetables and stones are all governed by the same fundamental laws. They apply to matter and the mind. At the material level those laws are discovered by physical effort, reason, and science; at the spiritual level they are discovered through yoga. There is no unbridgeable gulf between man and God. Whatever gulf a human being sees can be bridged over by personal evolution. The insect of today will in time realize its potential divinity.

Universal Elements in Hinduism

Hinduism is the dominant and principal religion of the sub-continent of India. It has influenced the cultural and spiritual life of Hindus through the teachings of the Vedas for the last five thousand years. It has also influenced directly or indirectly many Asiatic and Western countries. This influence was spread not by sword or force but through the teachings being directly preached and applied to practical life by the Hindu teachers. Hinduism interprets the inner and outer life as a total, inseparable whole.

Hinduism has a universal appeal. Here, religion and philosophy are combined. The philosophy helps in removing narrowness and dogmatism. Religion, as the life lived in practice, saves man from an “ivory tower” attitude of speculative theory having no practical bearing on actual life. The element of reason, both in philosophy and religion, saves a person from pitfalls and errors, while the element of emotion urges the follower to move forward.

Hinduism has no historical founder, unlike some other religions. Hinduism deals with universal principles governing the universe, the individual, and God. These principles are not a monopoly of any particular race or creed. They can be discovered by all through spiritual disciplines. These universal laws are called the Vedas. The individuals who discovered them were called rishis, sages, or saints. These sages are not just a thing of the past; there are sages even today. Such individuals have existed all the time and have inspired millions of people by their lives.

The Vedas show the way to happiness, here and hereafter, and also to freedom or liberation. The secret of happiness lies in cooperation between the gods, human beings, and sub-human species, since their interdependence is accepted. The gods are propitiated through worship, and humans and sub-humans through fulfillment of obligations. The Vedas lay emphasis on cooperation and not competition, for all competition degrades a human being to a level below the human. Cooperation does not have to depend on competition for incentive. Prosperity through competition does not bring inner contentment. On the contrary, it increases man's greed, which is like a bottomless pit. Material happiness, according to Hinduism, is impermanent, as it is derived from transitory objects. After enjoying all possible material happiness, a human being still asks, “How can I suppress restlessness and attain peace of the soul?”

The Vedas teach four basic principles:

1. the reality of God
2. the divinity of the soul
3. the oneness of all existence
4. the harmony of religions

1. Take the first point. God is a transcendental unchanging spirit, without any name or form. But he is also immanent in the whole universe, and through His grace and blessings, He inspires individuals from within to search for Him through moral and ethical life, concentration, meditation, worship, and inner fulfilment.

2. An individual is essentially an unchanging spirit, perfect and pure. Through ignorance, he becomes identified with matter and thinks himself individualized, forgetting his divine nature. What is called Satan in other religions is called ignorance in Hinduism. The fall from paradise is called individualization by Hinduism. The individual soul is termed the “apparent” soul. It is not absolutely real. Pain and pleasure, birth and death, heaven and hell are related to the “apparent” soul. The real soul is divine. This is the basis of freedom and respect. According to Hinduism, man should not be judged by color of skin or by economic and social position, but by his inner and essential divinity.

3. The universe is a projection of the spirit; it is like the sound that comes out of a flute or sparks coming out of a fire, or waves appearing and disappearing on the ocean. There is a basic unity behind the diversity. All individuals on all levels are interconnected. They are interrelated in and through that spirit, who is eternal and whose nature is pure consciousness.

There is no essential difference between God, man, the sub-human species, and nature. Whatever difference appears through the senses is only on the surface and can be overcome by personal evolution. Unity is the goal of knowledge. This unity on the psychophysical level is brought about with the help of the sciences. On the intellectual level, this unity is reinforced with the help of philosophy and reason. On the plane of the spirit, the same unity is actualized through religion, which gives the ultimate experience that everything is spirit. Ethics and morality in human relationships obtain their validity with the help of this oneness of spirit. One cannot hurt others without hurting oneself, since all is an interconnected unity.

4. Religion is not a dogma or a creed. To know God is to become God. Man can realize godliness in himself in this very life. If he overcomes his lower nature by spiritual discipline, he will manifest divinity within. According to Hinduism, this is the birthright of all human beings without exception. Naturally, all religions which show the path one must take towards perfection are valid paths to reach the final goal. In the present era, Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated the validity of these four principles through his personal life and teachings, and he is the proof of the universal spirit of Hinduism which is preached by the Vedas.

Life's Goals and Their Fulfilment According to Hinduism

Every human being has a goal in life which he or she tries to fulfil. It may be individual, communal, or national. The Hindu culture is one of the oldest of the world. Hindu society has undergone many changes over the millennia, but the fundamental ideals are still intact. As Swami Vivekananda, one of the great seers of Hinduism, has stated:

If Manu came back today, he would not be bewildered, and not find himself in a foreign land. The same laws are here, laws adjusted and thought out through thousands and thousands of years; customs, the outcome of the acumen of ages and the experience of centuries, that seem to be eternal; and as the days go by, as blow after blow of misfortune has been delivered upon them, such blows seem to have served one purpose only, that of making them stronger and more constant.¹

The present backwardness in Hindu society is only a temporary state of lull. In past ages India knew great advancement in science and philosophy. Superficial thinkers blame religion for the present condition. Actually, Hindu thinkers in the past have expounded a philosophy of life, based on “darshana” (experience), through which they achieved a wonderful synchronization of material prosperity and spiritual power.

Today the whole world is in a state of fear and uncertainty. Material power and technological advancement have not been successful in reducing the fear, much less in removing it. And this state of the health of the world will continue unless spiritual forces are brought to bear on material prosperity. The national souls of various nations manifest themselves very differently. Some of these traits are aggressiveness, desire for political power, desire for worldly success, goodness, contentment, and growth of the inner life. Within Hindu culture, whenever too much emphasis was placed on any one aspect, the Hindu nation paid heavily. Over the centuries there were invasions by foreign powers who were lured by India's wealth. But in the long run, because of her spiritual power, all the foreign powers were assimilated within the body politic of the Hindu nation. According to Swami Vivekananda:

The national ideals of India are Renunciation and Service. Intensify her in those channels, and the rest will take care itself. The banner of the spiritual cannot be raised too high in this country. In it alone is salvation.²

According to him, desire only for political power would completely ruin India. The highest ideals in Hindu culture are found embodied in the saints and prophets, many of whom are also considered national heroes.

The goal of life is to achieve the highest yogic experience of mental equanimity under all circumstances. This aspiration to achieve the highest has influenced the national character of India. The culmination point in the Hindu concept of religion is to discover the unity between God, soul, and nature.

According to Hinduism, God is He from whom the whole universe has originated, in whom it rests and in whom it will find its final unity. His nature is truth, auspiciousness, beauty, immortality, and fearlessness—pure spirit beyond the capacity of speech and mind. His personal aspect is manifested on this earth through the Incarnation, God's Messenger, appearing as a human being yet revealing a consciousness of the inmost soul of all beings. It is because of this that Hindus are respectful and tolerant, for this is what they have learned from reading the scriptures and seeing holy men and Incarnations. They wish to bring the goal into practice through such disciplines as seeing the presence of God in all beings, all religions, and all places.

Nature is an inanimate object forming the material bodies in creation. It stands in relation to the Supreme Reality much like the flute and its notes or the fire with its sparks. Scriptures thus ask us to see the unity behind all diversity. The individual soul is the Eternal Spirit reflected in matter. The soul is essentially one with the Divine Spirit, and the same Spirit is present in all names and forms. This is the basis of dharma or duty. The first duty is to know this Divine Presence in us through reading of the scriptures (sravana), then to meditate over it (manana), and finally to make it a part and parcel of our consciousness (nidhidyasana). Thus, with this awareness at the background, each person does the duty which spontaneously expresses itself through his personality and takes him on the path of progress to the Highest. Progress is from the level of animality to the level of divinity. The inequality which we find in the universe is admitted by Hinduism in the relative world only, but not in the absolute sense. In the absolute sense, there is no inequality. Inequality is seen because of the relative and incomplete awareness of the Divine Spirit within. When the Divine is recognized fully, inequality and its effects are transcended. Still, even in the relative life, the divinity of the soul is emphasized in Hinduism as an ideal.

The Hindu ideals therefore are: the reality of the Spirit, the immanence of God in this universe, the divinity of the soul, and the harmony of religions. These ideals were first discovered by the sages of the Vedas, who expressed them through their teachings, which have been transmitted in succession from teacher to student for thousands of years. All these teachings compiled together were called the Vedas. They were later amplified from time to time but always verified again and again by the experiences of India's greatest seers and prophets. The essentials have remained intact, and they form the body of the eternal laws or Shrutis such as the Upanishads. The changing aspects, called Smritis,

are codes which serve as a model for daily conduct for each individual and for society in its progress towards realization of the Highest. But the Vedas have the kernels of eternal truth.

Many Western thinkers and Westernized Indians during the last two hundred years have criticized the Vedic teachings. The contradictions are easily seen when we compare the two modes of living—Eastern and Western. Hindu life is regulated by both Shruti and Smriti, the eternal and the changing. In the passage of time, religion declines because the eternal laws are not being observed properly. Relative truths prevail at the sacrifice of the eternal truths. This is the occasion for God's Messengers to take birth: the Avatars. Through the godly message of the Incarnation, the mistakes, which have crept in because of the misunderstanding of the eternal principles, are removed. Once again the Truth is restored, in the light of the new values, as suited to the changing environment and conditions in society.

The divinity of the soul is fundamental to the Hindu faith. The soul's true, divine nature has been forgotten or veiled. Due to this forgetfulness or veiling, an individual acts foolishly. This foolish behaviour under the spell of ignorance (otherwise called sin) cannot change the Divine Essence. The individual grows wiser through suffering and experiences. Reincarnation follows. Birth after birth, he accumulates a depth of experiences. If he follows the right mode of conduct as prescribed by the Vedas, he goes nearer to the Truth. If, however, out of ignorance he falls under the thrall of the senses and the ego, he goes away from the Truth.

Everyone has the potential to become perfect and will eventually become perfect as his higher Self manifests. A sinner must not be condemned but treated with sympathy and understanding. Thus, he can really be helped. Man, in forgetting his true nature, acts like a brute—showing lust, greed, anger, and fear. Vedic knowledge helps him step by step to destroy the brute in him and manifest the Divine. That is the main goal of life. Scholarliness, social position, wealth, happiness here and hereafter, are only stages from the brute to the perfect. Through ignorance man identifies himself with the body, hankers after sense objects and becomes a slave of passions, desires, and greed. He clings to shadows. This is the lower self of man, the jiva, symbolized by the bird of the Upanishads, which sits on the lower branches of the tree and tastes the sweet and bitter fruits of this life. Through spiritual discipline and self-control, man becomes identified with the second bird, who merely sits calmly on the higher branches of the tree. In reality the two birds are identical, i.e., the higher self and the lower self. Man is Shiva, although he appears as jiva.

The essence of spiritual discipline is detachment and renunciation. Man should not get identified with matters of passing interest or with the body or with any external objects. Complete renunciation is the goal. It is a slow process. However, Hinduism admits and recommends pravritti marga, the secular life with legitimate desires and fulfilment artha (wealth) and kama (desire) must be guided by dharma (righteousness). The ideal is moksha, complete liberation from desire and attachment. Religion teaches the way of renunciation. Supernatural powers obtained through Raja Yoga without the ideal of total renunciation become injurious in the long run. The spiritual aspirant who follows this way loses the goal. Study of the physical sciences is also a kind of yoga, which has knowledge and power as the goal. Atomic power and Hatha Yoga can both be dangerous and are not always useful. Jnana Yoga, the path of renunciation, teaches recognition and abandonment of the unreal through the process of discrimination and will power.

Bhakti Yoga is the renunciation of selfish happiness, such as the attainment of heaven, and teaches

love of God for its own sake. Karma Yoga directs the energies within and channels them into useful and unselfish actions performed without desires for the fruits thereof. For this purpose, Hinduism has introduced the science of Adhikaravada—developing the capacity of each individual according to stages. These are steps to reach the Ultimate. The four stages are: Brahmacharya (studentship with discipline), grhasthya (householder's life), vanaprastha (meditation, study, and contemplation), and sannyasa (complete detachment). Thus, religion becomes a practical affair. Otherwise, it is only a dogma, a bundle of creeds.

Spiritual progress is never lost. You start from where you are and go to the higher state. If the goal is not achieved in this very life, the level one reaches becomes the starting point for his next birth. Evil deeds bring suffering. Good deeds create happiness. Evil deeds and thoughts take one away from the presence of God. Good deeds and thoughts bring one near to God. Nothing can undo the results of past actions except for working them out through suffering, while planting positive and good thoughts for the future. Virtue and vice do not cancel each other. One gradually gives up selfishness and wickedness. Through good actions, the heart is made pure—chitta shudhi. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”³ Sravana, manana, and nidhidhyasana are the methods.

Unity and diversity are the fundamental laws of nature. The diversity is not accidental. God manifests Himself through His immanence throughout the three planes of the universe: causal, subtle, and gross. The Divine Spirit manifests itself through countless gross and subtle objects. He is Antaryami; He controls all things by remaining within. The whole universe functions with order and not chaos through the laws of cause and effect. The universe does not function by the mechanistic interpretations based on greed, selfishness, lust, and competition. The solution for all human problems lies in the relationship between unity and diversity. We must draw our lessons from the Divine Pattern in nature. There is harmony but not rigid uniformity. No two leaves on a tree are identical. Side by side, two snowflakes are similar yet completely different. No two fingers are equal in all respects. Individual relationships reveal the potential divinity of each soul. Differences admittedly exist on the physical and mental planes, but we have to dive deep into ourselves. There is an everlasting unity at the core. We shall discover the true unity, within and without.

In order to follow the principle of unity in human relationships, we must love all, transcending personal likes and dislikes. Through this higher love, we will discover the unity throughout the universe. This love is referred to in the saying, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”⁴ Through renunciation and detachment, true dharma is realized. The privilege of service to all with a spirit of detachment is the wonderful potential given to a human being. Renunciation and service are the twin channels through which international relationships can be made smooth and fruitful. It is through this method alone that national aggressiveness, sovereignty, colonialism and such forces can be overcome. Otherwise, we will only be generating disturbances throughout the world. When these negative forms have been overcome, real freedom of all nations can become a practical reality.

The relationship between individuals can be made more practical through understanding the duty each person is expected to perform—not as a right or desire but for its own sake. Assertion of rights produces a scramble for power, which can only result in frictions and war. Emphasis on rights degrades a man. We should, therefore, do our duties according to our capacity and our social status, all the while trying to approximate our highest ideals. When we accept our present duties and perform them very cheerfully, we make ourselves capable and qualified for higher duties. This is called

dharma. Dharma or duty guides the relationship between parent-child, husband-wife, and state-citizen. This is called swadharma. Through such relationships, the Highest is unfolding itself. Each duty demands our service to others. Thus do we renounce the lower self. Through renunciation and service, one attains the highest goal.

To see the One among many has always been the keynote of Hindu life. This is a distinctive feature of Hindu culture based on the experiences of our saints and sages. The problems of family life, and other individual and social problems have been solved with this magic wand. Hindu culture and its offshoot, the Buddhist culture, spread not by weapons but by universal love—Mahamaitri, Mahakaruna. The power of love is irresistible. It created great respect for India during the bygone ages. Through love and sympathy, the lower classes were gradually assimilated and unified without any friction. Such events take place in a subtle manner without even making an individual conscious that he or she is slowly and gradually being raised to the status of a god.

In the religious field, also, the same unity and diversity forms the basis. God is the basis of all religions. Just as all the radii meet at the center, so all paths lead to the same goal. Although diversity of tastes must be admitted and considered, worship of the Absolute is the perennial goal. This Absolute, which is beyond time, space, and causation, is realized through the relative world. It is manifested through time, space, and causation—through variety in nature. Sri Ramakrishna's teachings are the latest demonstration of this perennial truth of the harmony of all religions.

In the world of religion, no movement is in a straight line. All movements are through waves: an ebb tide is followed by a flow tide. For the past several centuries, Hindu society has been showing signs of stagnation through a certain amount of exclusiveness, fanaticism, and intolerance. Pride and arrogance in high caste without the requisite, inner qualifications gave rise to untouchability and a scramble for power and position. Thus, Hindu society lost its dynamic and creative power.

In modern India, the signs of a new awakening and rebirth are clear. Indian culture and tradition are a gigantic machine through which saints and sages are constantly manufactured, keeping the society awake and moving. Through this cultural machine the husk is separated from the kernel, and the eternal truth is revealed. Free India is a manifestation of this unity and diversity, with such forces as untouchability, caste privileges, and others slowly being curtailed. A new democratic sentiment is clearly emerging, with the inherent power to overcome all dogmatic and creedal forces. Although there are still differences within and without, these differences will not be hard to overcome with the recovery of the proper cultural and national strength. Such recovery is based on the fundamental principle of the divinity of each soul. The spiritual basis for freedom and justice is found in the laws of unity and diversity. Thus, national and even international unity will be made practical. This is the goal the Hindu religion wants to make available to all the citizens of the world. By putting an end to national rivalries and jealousies through the application of spiritual principles, peace will be established on the earth.

Four Stages of Spiritual Evolution (Vedic View)

According to the Vedic teachers, all life is spiritual. One reality termed Atman or Brahman exists. In the transcendental aspect, it is beyond time, space and causation—the One-without-a-second. It also exists as immanent, manifesting through time, space, and causation as the universe—both seen and unseen. Through its own power of Prakriti, the one Reality becomes modified and appears as the universe, even in its grossest manifestation. This view is supported by scriptures, reason, and the experiences of realized souls through thousands of years (Shruti, yukti, and anubhava). Life therefore has a spiritual aim, and the goal is spiritual experience culminating in God or Self-realization, “God” and “soul” being synonyms for one, identical consciousness.

God's supreme Reality is untouched by anything material, but according to the materialistic view so often held nowadays, the ultimate value in life is found in matter. Naturally, the goal of life would also be material enjoyment. By elimination of various obstacles, more and more enjoyment would automatically be expected by individuals through the improvement of material surroundings by means of science, technology, economics, politics, ethics, etc. According to the followers of this philosophy, the goal in this world is the here and now. Moksha (freedom) is regarded as utopian and non-realistic by the materialist who believes that freedom from desires for earthly objects is impossible.

Vedic thought does not concur with the materialistic view, maintaining that it is not supported by reason, scriptures, or experience. Although the Vedantic viewpoint emphasizes the spiritual goal of life, it does not negate worldly life but merely puts it second in the perspective. Aspiration to achieve the highest with sincerity of effort and purpose prepares the individual to see clearly the validity of the goal. Vedantic scriptures teach that one should steadily go on performing the duties of life according to one's natural instincts, but guided all the while by a proper outlook on these duties, which are selected through environment, education, and heredity as determined by the laws of karma. One can utilize life's natural duties for a spiritual end.

An egocentric outlook on life, when put in a proper perspective, will gradually change to theocentric or cosmo-centric. The forms of external activity may remain the same, but the attitude with which activity is performed makes the difference. The Self is satisfied, and the Lord also, through service to all. Science, art, philosophy, and other departments of human activity become pathways leading gradually and steadily towards the goal. The laboratory, cloister, temple, and battlefield, though apparently different, lead us to the same goal.

Religion covers the whole of life. It is a means, not an end in itself. The goal is God, and life is a journey to the shrine of Truth. All individuals are fellow travellers in the pilgrimage towards Truth. Vedic thinkers have divided this journey into four stages. Each stage gives us the necessary strength, courage, and conviction to progress to the succeeding stage. These four stages are elaborated by both wings of the Vedic scriptures, the Shrutis and Smritis. They are expounded in detail in the Smritis as:

1. Studentship (Brahmacharya)
2. Householdship (Garhasthya)
3. Retirement and Contemplative Stage (Vanaprastha)
4. Sannyasa or Absolute Detachment.

Let us examine, one by one, the four stages. The student's life represents the period of Brahmacharya. Brahmacharya essentially consists of the training and discipline of body and mind. It teaches the young student to conserve mental and physical energy for future use, both for the acquisition of higher knowledge and the discharge of responsibilities and duties to a family, community, country and world at large. The natural tendency of a human being to dissipate his vital forces is first checked through discipline, and then channeled, with the purpose of self-emancipation and service to the world. No value is negated, but every value is properly judged and given only as much importance as it deserves. This is what opens the way for higher and higher values to manifest until the goal is reached. Essential virtues like humility, modesty, prayer, meditation and respect for the sacred, are brought to the notice of the student through practical lessons in daily life. The secret of training is self-control and austerity. Today's parents are largely responsible for the failure and unhappiness in the lives of their children, for they are very lax in seeing that the children observe these disciplines. They themselves do not set an example for their children. The whole scheme of strengthening the individual's inner life by external and internal controls in the first stage of life is not exemplified or practised by the parents. Therefore, in our schools and other centers of training, it is not surprising to observe the reign of maximum confusion and chaos. No proper training is available, in spite of the colossal resources spent. It is quite natural therefore, that family life at present is chaotic, under tremendous stress and strain, with hundreds of unthinkable problems. According to the Upanishads, the most basic required discipline for Brahmacharya is Tapas.

The second stage is that of Garhasthya, the householder's life. A man or woman is not complete by himself or herself. There is a natural, instinctive attraction between them. The parental instinct to reproduce is very strong. If these natural instincts are repressed, unhealthy tendencies may develop both in body and mind as a result. Marriage is a very scientific outlet for the social expression of the parental instinct, and is considered very sacred in Hinduism. To run away from marriage for any reason except for exclusive pursuit of the highest realization is considered as running away from life. For the average man, marriage is a valuable means of natural evolution and spiritual growth. The Hindu scriptures enumerate and illustrate many shining examples of married teachers and their students. Their purpose is to inspire succeeding generations with devotion, love and faithfulness by making it clear and easy to practise the highest ideals of purity and truthfulness. The Supreme Reality manifests both as a male and female principle.

These two inseparable halves co-exist. They are interdependent, cooperative and incomplete without each other. There is no question of superiority or inferiority, for they are not two; thus, comparison cannot even be thought of. A marriage and children form the basis of family life. Progeny is the medium through which family and culture are continued, a link between the dead and the living. There are hundreds of prayers in the Vedic texts to be chanted both daily and occasionally by the married people together for the purpose of having noble and heroic children, strong in body and mind, capable of following higher and higher spiritual goals.

Married life, therefore, is not for enjoyment but for realizing the highest truths. Children are sacred trusts. They become a curse if they are born simply because of fleshly attraction without self-control and prayer. In the marriage relationship, the wife is considered as Sahadharmini— husband and wife are one soul, living in two bodies as it were, expressing common ideals and aspirations. They pursue their ideals together. Sensual love is gradually transformed into self-forgetful devotion. It is natural that perfect agreement in taste and other channels of activity should not be expected, because such an unrealistic expectation only results in quarrels, incompatibilities and divorce. Harmony can be created with diversity, just as in music. A great deal of chance is also seen, even in ideal marriages. Life is a mysterious unit containing diverse forces, interwoven and working symbiotically on themselves. A great deal of sacrifice, restraint, and endurance is expected, both from the parents and the individuals surrounding them. Married life can never be happy if devoted only to selfish pleasures. Life energies have to be properly directed with the guidance of the scriptures, one's elders, and through the fulfilment of responsibilities and duties towards the family, the community and the whole social fabric, in addition to the country and the world.

Garhasthya is succeeded by the stage of Vanaprastha. The physical body follows material laws. The power and vigour supporting the physical body and sense organs decline with the advancement of age. The sense organs lose their appetite. A new vista is opened. The mind hankers to know deeper truths and realities. Material achievements which served as an incentive in youth, appear to be flimsy and inadequate as other gates open. At this stage, the husband and wife retire from an active life of aspiration and enter, as it were, into spiritual communion. Their children take responsibility to follow the family aspirations and traditions. Pursuit of youthful activities creates conflict both in family and surroundings as age advances. It may appear unnatural and even neurotic to others to see a parent withdraw from previous aspirations to pursue the higher phase of unfoldment of inner development with meditation and contemplation, the mind becoming silent. But by this process, the way to the fourth stage is opened.

Sannyas is the fourth stage. Every individual is called upon at some time or other to give up his or her duties to wife, husband, children, friends—for death is no respecter of persons. The last part of life's journey must be walked in single file. It is at this stage that a human being discovers that he is more than a social being. He has a higher duty than mere protection of the country and its wealth and glories. He is a spark of God, and his soul has infinite dimensions. Naturally, the soul feels hunger for communion with the infinite. Sooner or later, we all hear the voice: “What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul?”¹ For the family's sake sacrifice the individual; for the community's, the family; for the country's, the community; for the world's, the country; for the sake of God, everything.

The awareness which dawns upon the individual at this stage is called Sannyas. A free soul discards all ties and attachments to the material world. He does not cherish any private loyalties or exclusive loves. He belongs to all without distinction and all belong to him.

It is not a life of selfishness, but of complete dedication and service to all. He goes wherever he is called and seeks no reward for the work.

Few only know the truth. The rest will
hate And laugh at thee, great one; but

pay no heed. Go thou, the free, from place to place, and help them out of darkness, maya's veil. Without the fear of pain or search for pleasure, go beyond them both, Sannyasin bold! Say—

Om, Tat Sat, Om!²

He does not hate the world but loves it, seeing in it the manifestation of the Lord. Christ, Buddha, St. Francis, Sri Ramakrishna, and Swami Vivekananda were the greatest lovers of humanity. It is a life of real freedom from passions and desires. This freedom can come to man while living. After death, such an individual merges in God. It is a glorious culmination of life, the happiest ending. There is not an iota of sorrow or regret.

These are the four stages of life according to Hinduism. One does not conflict with the other. Life is a growth for man, beginning with the controlled expression of his animal propensities and ending with total freedom from all those propensities and realization of the highest Truth. This freedom is a legitimate culmination of a well-planned and well-regulated life based on reason, scriptures and experience. Ignorant persons do not understand a self-realized soul, for he is not of the socio-political order. He does not encourage or take part in military, economic or political activities. At the same time, these realized souls are the pillars of culture and society, for they have known and expressed the spiritual foundations of this world. Any society that disregards them and relies on purely military, political and social power disintegrates in course of time. The Vedic scheme of life which brings forth such free souls is indeed glorious.

Worship of God in the Form of Mother

The worship of God as “Mother” is a unique contribution of Hinduism. The Hindu view is deeply philosophical and, when applied in practical life, transforms human life and behaviour. The ultimate reality can be viewed from two standpoints: one is a-cosmic and the other cosmic. From the standpoint of the a-cosmic, there is only pure Spirit, without name and form. It is described in the Upanishads as “Neti, Neti—Not This, Not this.” In the deepest meditation, one is not aware of body or universe; there is neither creator nor creation. This aspect is called Nirguna Brahman, the Attributeless Brahman. But from the cosmic standpoint, we see the universe and think of a Creator endowed with attributes. He is a provident, kind, just God, called Saguna Brahman. He is the personal God. Though ultimate Reality is one, sometimes it is active and at other times it is inactive, like water with waves and without waves, like a moving snake and a coiled snake.

At this point we may ask, what is the nature of this creation? According to the Vedas, it is just the projection of the Lord, without desire or motivation. It is of the very nature of the Reality.

As a spider spreads out and withdraws (its thread), as on the earth grow the herbs (and trees), and as from the living man issues out hair on the head and body, so out of the Immutable does the universe emerge here (in this phenomenal creation).¹

Like water and waves, flute and melody, spider and web; it is called the Lila or sport of the Lord, or Maya, which cannot be explained.

But the Nitya and the Lila are the two aspects of the same Reality. As I have said before, it is like the roof and the steps leading to it. The Absolute plays in many ways: as Isvara, as the gods, as man, and as the universe. The Incarnation is the play of the Absolute as man.

Do you know how the Absolute plays as man? It is like the rushing down of water from a big roof through a pipe; the power of Satchidananda—nay, Satchidananda Itself—descends through the conduit of a human form as water descends through the pipe.²

What is creation? How does creation take place? Through Shakti, the power which is inherent in Brahman but not separate from Him. When desiring to create, Brahman uses Shakti. Then He is called “Saguna Brahman” or the personal God. This personal God, which controls the universe, is called by various names depending on which of its various aspects is emphasized. In Judaism, we get the concept of Jehovah, which is associated especially with justice. Islam has Allah, which is associated especially with power. Christianity has the Father, which is associated especially with love. Hinduism has the trinity of Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the rearranger. That Reality, God, is also called the Mother of the universe. Sri Ramakrishna always referred to God as “My Mother.” While conscious of the body and the world, one cannot ignore Shakti or the personal God. She is the totality of the universe. Yet, She is greater than any of its parts. She controls birth and death, our daily thoughts and actions. By Her power we are entangled; by Her grace we are liberated. Srimad Tota Puri, the great non-dualist teacher of Sri Ramakrishna, saw no creation. To him the world was unreal. Endowed with an iron constitution and unshakeable will-power, unaware of the temptations of the flesh, detached from the body and the world, he could lift his mind into Samadhi. On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna believed in both the Absolute and the Mother. In the waking state, this universe he saw was a manifestation of the Mother. She protects and controls the universe.

He would sing Her praise.

O Kali, my Mother full of Bliss!
Enchantress of the almighty Siva!
In thy delirious joy Thou dancest,
Clapping Thy hands together!³

Tota Puri always used to laugh at the word “Kali”, and the use of hand-clapping to sing her name. He would ask Sri Ramakrishna whether he was making chapatis (Indian bread) by clapping his hands.⁴ But that iron-willed teacher was stricken with very painful blood-dysentery and finally wanted to commit suicide, to get rid of the body consciousness altogether. At that crucial moment, he received the vision of the Divine Mother, revealing to him Her inscrutable power, even over what he had considered “his” mighty will.

Sri Ramakrishna worshipped Kali all his life. He established a wonderful relationship between the Divine Mother and himself. After having undergone austerities and purifying himself completely, he got Her vision and discovered that She was the embodiment of bliss and infinite compassion. He always felt Her power behind him; protecting him and giving enlightenment, granting wisdom, guiding him through trials, and clearing his doubts. Himself almost illiterate, he could silence renowned pundits and scholars on extremely knotty religious problems, for he was ever conscious of the presence of Divine Mother by his side. It was his conviction that creation moves and runs through Her.

Love unites man with God like a child with the mother. The child loves the mother more than the father because the mother is all-forgiving, all-sacrificing. When the child gets a scolding from the father, he runs to the mother.

Auspicious One! Forgive my sins.

A wicked son is sometimes born,
But an unkind mother there cannot be.⁵

Perchance, the child is born naughty, but the mother will not be naughty. So, a Hindu feels closest to God when calling Him “Mother”.

The motherhood of God is a very ancient Hindu doctrine. Through the ages, it has taken firm root due to the experience of saints and sages. One illumined woman-sage, identified with the divine power, says, “I am queen of the universe, the giver of all wealth, the bestower of the fruits of action. I am omniscient, although I exist by the power. I appear as many. I am the protector of men, the destroyer of enemies. I bring peace to earth and stretch out amidst the heavens. I have produced the father. As wind blows by itself, I produce all phenomena by the power. I am independent. My glory is the phenomenal world. Such am I by my own nature and power.” In this Vedic hymn, all the attributes of Brahman were manifest in the woman seer. Creation is the manifestation of the Shakti or Divine Power, which is called the Mother. Brahman and Shakti are not different. They are like fire and its power to burn. The Kena Upanishad, one of the principal Upanishads, concludes with a story to demonstrate this principle. Once the gods achieved a victory over the demons through the grace of the Divine Mother. They thought it was due to their own power, but then they saw in the heavens the figure of a woman, called Uma, who was a manifestation of the great cosmic power. She instructed them that it was through Her power that they had won their victory.

The Puranas are a more concrete form of the abstract principles of the Upanishads. So, we have got in the Puranas manifestations of Shakti, such as, Jagaddhatri, Annapurna, and Durga. In one of the Puranas, called the Markandeya Purana, we have the beautiful story of Mahishasura. He was a great demon who overpowered the gods. The gods propitiated Shiva and Vishnu. The power, which then manifested out of their bodies, took the form of a woman, Shakti. The Devi, with divine force, vanished the demon Mahishasura. She reestablished the gods in their glory, thus, affirming the universal law mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita.

Whenever there is decay of dharma and the
rise of adharma, then I embody Myself, O
Bharata. For the protection of the good,
for the destruction of the wicked and for
the establishment of dharma I am born age
after age.⁶

This victory of the Goddess is known as Vijaya and is celebrated with great enthusiasm by the Hindus.

The philosophy of the Mother’s worship is deep and profound and, at the same time, based on experience. We have mentioned earlier that in the Old Testament, the Creator is a male principle and the attributes ascribed to Him are those of judge, king, master, etc. In the New Testament, however, this concept is transmuted into the “Spirit of God”, which is looked on as a Father, a much more intimate relationship. Yet, in both, God is looked upon as basically extra-cosmic. It is, indeed, a majestic figure to be worshipped with awe and fear. There are Old Testament prophets of later times who spoke of love of God, yet there, also, the element of fear prevails. The Hindu view is that God is

not extra-cosmic. He is both immanent and transcendent. The creative power is not outside creation. The universe is a projection of the creative power and not separate from it.

Creation is a continual process, according to the scientists. Matter is perpetually created; it only alternates between the seed state and the state of manifestation. This is called the theory of cycles. Sri Ramakrishna used to express this idea by likening the Divine Mother to the mistress of a house. Just as the housewife gathers the seeds of various vegetables and stores them for the next year's sowing, just so the Divine Mother stores the elements from one cycle of creation and brings them out again for the next cycle. This creative energy is not purposeless or nonintelligent, as science says, because it is inseparable from Brahman, who is existence, consciousness, and bliss. We do sense intelligence underlying the evolution from amoeba to man, from man to Christ-man or Buddha-man.

Why is it that this creative power is called Mother and not Father? All forms are in the womb before creation and are nourished by the mother after birth. Likewise, we are all contained in the Divine Mother before manifestation and are nourished by her throughout our existence. Therefore, we are all Her children.

How does She run this creation? There are two aspects of Her creation; one is good, the other evil. This is called "Vidya Maya" and "Avidya Maya". Yet, She is above both. With the help of the light from a fire, we can do either good or bad. It is not the defect of the fire. Our prayer should be for the manifestation of the brighter, nobler aspect, the Vidya: "Lead us not into temptation."⁷ Attraction and repulsion are also Her manifestations in the gross, physical world. On the moral level, these manifestations work as good and evil, activity prompted by worldly desire and desirelessness due to non-attachment, truth and falsehood, etc.

Two types of people always exist. Some choose knowledge, and the others choose ignorance. Sri Ramakrishna classified human beings into four classes. The first class was "Baddha", the bound souls. The second class was "Mumukshu", those individuals struggling for freedom. The third class was "Mukta", those who had achieved their freedom, and the final class was "Nityamukta", those who were ever-free. Thus, creation continues.

The worship of God as Mother should have a tremendous impact on society. The position of a woman becomes dignified when she is understood to be the veritable manifestation of the Mother Divine. Naturally, feelings of respect and devotion arise spontaneously in the human mind. The present degeneration of human behaviour all over the world is mainly due to the loss of self-respect and respect for others. In India, a woman is always addressed as "Mother." Without woman man is considered incomplete. This is the significance of the concept of God, the Lord Shiva, as half Shiva and half Parvati. This form of the Lord is called "Ardhanarineshwara." The idea of mother gives strength as well as kindness to a woman. It removes fear from her life. Accompanied by his mother, even a small boy can face tremendous odds and difficulties. The present moral confusion, particularly among women, is due to the fact that they have lost their dignity, allowing themselves to be playthings in the hands of men. They can command respect in society by asserting spiritual power. God as Mother gives a new meaning to creation.

One problem has often baffled philosophers. Why should a perfect God create an imperfect universe full of suffering? The Hindu explanation is "Maya" or "Lila." As maya, it foils all attempts at reasoning. It is, as it were, a dream-state, a hypnotised condition. Try to understand it rationally,

and we are thrown into unending argument, going round and round in the circle of time, space and causation. When, however, we understand that the Ultimate Power, which is the true Reality, is behind this universe, we realize that what we call the universe is the selfsame Reality manifesting through the conditions of time, space, and causation.

The concept of the Motherhood of God gives new meaning to creation. She creates in a playful manner, an eternal child playing a game. We must play our parts in her drama well. Different parts are assigned to different individuals. The so-called suffering is necessary to make the drama enjoyable. We are not to take everything to be real and true. Mother alone is real and true. The magic is illusory, yet, the magician is real.

Do not take this play very seriously. Taking it seriously, you develop ulcers or other physical and mental ailments. Play your part sincerely, but always remember the Mother. Players are “blindfolded” because she wants the play to continue. But if you are tired, She will remove the bondage. In the course of play, we fight and scratch. It is like kittens and the mother cat. Sometimes the mother cat plays with the kittens with her paws, but the kittens know that she is the mother and do not get hurt. We should do the duty assigned to us or chosen by us, while we play this game in the world. The Mother Divine is the ocean of mercy ! She will be happy to give us freedom.

This is the last word in religion. See the Divine Mother in everything—fear and pleasure, tears and laughter, life and death; but do not run away from life. That will make life more miserable. We should be God's instruments. This can be done by giving up ego and saying, “Thy will be done.” With this complete self-surrender, we become united with the Godhead. Then there flows unlimited energy with a great joy to work, and peace and fearlessness follow.

Sages of India

The life story of India has been created by the sages: Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Shankara, and the preceptors of the most ancient times. In the present day, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda are the animators of the national consciousness. Today hundreds of teachers have cropped up or will come on to the stage, trying to impress the speciality of their teaching on the Indian scene or the Western world. One and all of them have to accept the genuine experience and teaching of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda and have to pay a respectful tribute to what they have done for modern India, in particular, and the world, in general.

Although India is the creation of the sages, the creators of American life and tradition have been Washington, Lincoln, Franklin, Edison, Ford, Rockefeller and others in the field of politics, economics and social institutions. They are the makers of America. America is interested in protecting the economic interests of others through politics and allied institutions. England has been predominantly a military power; diplomacy, politics, and the power over other nations have been the main aim of British life. Russia, also a great power, is interested in protecting the rights of the proletariat. India has made the spiritual the central aim of the life of the people and has kept this theme alive throughout history, giving a secondary place to all other interests. Other interests have to serve the main interest of the culture, which is spiritual.

However, India is known by two words, Dharmabhumi and Karmabhumi, and there is full cooperation between spiritual values and political and economical values. Indian history shows a close cooperation between the spiritual thinkers and the protectors of the continent. They are referred to as Brahmins and Kshatriyas. They both are rulers and protect each other and are complimentary to one another.

Wherever is Krishna the Lord of Yoga,
wherever is Partha, the wielder of the bow,
there are prosperity, victory, expansion,
and sound policy; such is my conviction.¹

There are innumerable sages who have played prominent roles in the history and tradition of India. The universal doctrines of Hinduism, called Vedanta, have been kept alive without discontinuity from the most ancient times to the present day by such individuals as Yajnavalkya, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. In other cultures, we find that theologians and philosophers cannot go together. But spiritual experience has been the foundation of Indian thought. Through their own experience, the sages and seers could easily point out every principle from which both man and the universe have come. This knowledge has come from supersensuous experience, which was gained through a discipline of self-control and contemplation. The ideal of life has been simplicity, detachment,

renunciation and service.

Even now in modern times, people retire in old age to sacred places like Benares, Vrindavan and Hardwar in order to spend the remaining portion of their lives in contemplation and the search for spiritual experience. Weary souls, who cannot afford to retire to holy places, seek holy company, making slow and steady progress towards the goal of realization of the ultimate truth. Thus, a standard has been given to all people to develop individual life by going through three stages to reach the fourth and final stage. The first stage is studentship, the second is the householder's life, the third is the life of contemplation and meditation, and, finally, complete renunciation. A proper understanding of these four stages, called Ashramas, is very necessary, particularly in the modern times when everything is measured in terms of profits and sense pleasures.

The continuity of Hindu spiritual culture is unique and memorable for it has stood undiminished for thousands of years. In the passage of time, it may have developed some drawbacks which have been adequately pointed out by all the thinkers of the present age, prominently by Swami Vivekananda. Still, no one has condemned the spirit and the universal message which have sustained the culture and the country throughout time. Swami Vivekananda's words on this point are memorable:

This national ship, my countrymen, my friends, my children—this national ship has been ferrying millions and millions of souls across the waters of life. For scores of shining centuries it has been plying across this water, and through its agency, millions of souls have been taken to the other shore, to blessedness. But today, perhaps through your own fault, this boat has become a little damaged, has sprung a leak; and would you therefore curse it? Is it fit that you stand up and pronounce malediction upon it, one that has done more work than any other thing in the world? If there are holes in this national ship, this society of ours, we are its children. Let us go and stop the holes. Let us gladly do it with our hearts' blood; and if we cannot, then let us die.²

The foundation of this vitality has been the word of the scriptures, called the Vedas. The history of India during the last 2000 years has been the closing period of this epoch, because from that point on, we find that outsiders came pouring in; Greeks, Scythians, Huns, Moslems and Christians. All of them, without exception, came to blossom following contact with the rich tradition and culture of India. The cause of India's continuity of which we spoke earlier is loyalty to eternal principles and the ability to adapt itself to changing conditions. The changing conditions belong only to the external, but the inner core remains constant. Man and society are compared to temples; the external is subject to change, but the inner stands unchanged. This fundamental loyalty to the reality of the indwelling

spirit remains constant in India. Swami Vivekananda from time to time referred to it in his lectures given in various parts of the world:

The Indian nation cannot be killed.
Deathless it stands, and it will
stand so long as that spirit shall
remain as the background, so long as
her people do not give up their
spirituality.³

Rigidity and fluidity are two aspects of the same temple. One is expressed through the caste system and the other through the eternal reality of God. In the objective world, that universal principle is expressed by three words: Ganga, Gita, Gayatri. The most ancient worship of God through sacrificial ceremonies was replaced by temples in the middle ages and modern times, maintaining the central theme that God is the eternal reality of this universe and man is divine by nature, and recognizing the spiritual values in society as realized through the four stages in life mentioned earlier.

We thus see that the main elements of Vedic culture and tradition are eternal or timeless truths given in time to suit the prevailing conditions in society. This eternal message to a changing society is God, His nature (soul), the human being, and their mutual relationship: “Tat Tvam Asi—Thou Art That.” Paul Duessen, philosopher of the Upanishads, stated that the Hindus were successful in finding out the one origin of the subjective universe, Brahman.

The truths given in time are called relative truths. They are suitable to a particular time and are taught through rituals and creeds. Impressions called Samskaras, which accompany the individual from cradle to grave, are expressed through social laws and are described in Vedas and Smrtis. Vedas are great spiritual truths, timeless and universal and applicable to all the people in the world. Personalities are subordinated so much that little is known about the authors or their lives. On the other hand, Smrtis and Puranas have descriptions of personalities, their heritage, their anecdotes and works, their achievements, and their interpretations of the eternal laws to suit the contemporary conditions. They are known as the sages and seers, holy men. This is the special feature and unique characteristic of the Hindu teachings. They keep unchanged the eternal truth of the Upanishads, and yet carry it on to the society to suit changing conditions and enable people to hold on to the eternal truth through mythology, stories and rituals which are known as Smrtis.

Here is a practical point of a sage who married. His name was Yajnavalkya and he was a principal teacher of the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad. He had two wives and a large house full of disciples. The names of his two wives were Maitreyi and Katyayani. He had a wonderful disciple, Janaka, who was an emperor. Both teacher and student followed the ancient ideal of the four ashramas. They practiced daily obligatory duties and lived in a forest retreat. The teacher Yajnavalkya visited kings but lived a life of self-control and contemplation and communed with nature. He also had a tremendous sense of humor. The students provided all the necessities for the teacher, and the teacher gave them peace and freedom through knowledge, and they passed that knowledge to other students in succession. The main theme of that knowledge was:

Know that Self alone that is one without

a second, on which are strung heaven, the earth and the inter-space, the mind and the vital forces together with all the other organs; and give up all other talk.⁴

It is the unitary consciousness, allowing no distinction and bringing peace and joy and fulfilment to all. How did they realize this truth? They realized it through physical, mental, and spiritual discipline. They lived and communed with nature through a simple, clean, pure and uncomplicated life.

What is the proof of this experience? Our life becomes calm and quiet and desires become less and less. You get it by analyzing nature, both external and internal. That nature is eternal and at the same time changing through name and form. Sense organs are not the only channels; we can also get spiritual visions and intuition of the truth. When the senses do not function and reasoning also stops, then intuition comes. In such a high state of intuition, a sage declared:

Hear, ye children of immortal bliss! even ye that reside in higher spheres! I have found the Ancient One who is beyond all darkness, all delusion: knowing Him alone you shall be saved from death over again.⁵

His mind was completely purified, and all selfishness, cravings, and desires were gone. These were the sages, saints and seers who made the basic foundation of the line of truth. Krishna, Rama, and Buddha all followed the same principles and got the same truth, which was preached to society throughout the passage of time. Thus we find that, although the Vedic truth is eternal by nature and exists beyond time, it is expressed in time through the world teachers. Thus, personalities are necessary for the spiritual unfoldment of necessary truths. Buddha preached against a personal God but followed a personal truth. Thus, the basis of Buddhism was formed through the personality of Lord Buddha.

The trouble of those whose minds are attached to the unmanifest is greater; for the way of the Unmanifest is attained with difficulty by the embodied soul.⁶

Therefore, we have incarnations, saints and sages in all religions. Their main function is to interpret the eternal truths to suit changing times and individuals. Krishna and Christ cannot be eternal, but the eternal truths have flowed through them.

You can learn their teaching with or without them. These Prophets or teachers of society give one set of truth which is valuable for that time. An example is Moses; he preached an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Every age must produce a sage, and the new sage will give higher teachings. Roman coin does not get currency in modern time, though as a coin it has the same metal. This makes the distinction between the worship of the dead and the living.

Whatever being there is glorious,

prosperous or powerful, know that to
have sprung but from a spark of My
splendour.⁷

The sages of India are numerous, but the principle ones are Rama and Krishna. Here is an example of a teacher of the world, Rama. He fulfilled the duties of husband and king at the same time. He was an ideal son, who respected his father's wish, an ideal king, who sacrificed Sita to fulfill the wishes of his subjects, an ideal husband, who installed a golden image of Sita by his side. Here is Sita, an ideal wife and example of Hindu womanhood. She followed Rama into exile and shared his life of austerity. She was forcefully taken by Ravana and remained unmoved by his threats and bribes. She was sensitive about her husband's honour and underwent a fire ordeal. She kept constant her spirit of patience through trials, while waiting for reunion. Sita is an exquisite creation of a Hindu sage, poet, and artist. You can have hundreds of Ramas but only one Sita. She remains the ideal of womanhood forever.

Next comes an all-time ideal, Krishna. He was an ideal sannyasin and householder in one. There is a great similarity between Krishna and Christ. As babies they both were hunted to be killed but were taken to safety and grew up in simple surroundings. Krishna, as a young man, was king and advisor to kings in diplomacy, war and statecraft. But he kept no throne for himself. He gave advice as a man of detachment, witnessing passing events.

He who sees inaction in action and action
in inaction is wise amongst men; he is
poised and is a performer of all actions.⁸

His hands and feet were ever busy while his mind looked over to things far and near. He explained personality, cosmic and individual, through the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. He was a friend and philosopher to Arjuna. The teaching of the Bhagavad Gita kept the Indian people alive throughout the ages, during all types of trying circumstances. It kept them dynamic and filled them with great hope for thousands of years. Enmity to none and friendship, charity and goodwill to all.

In time, rituals again became important and the caste system became dominant and the tyranny of books and priests took an upper hand. Another teacher came in the form of Buddha, 600 years before Christ. He revived the teachings of the Upanishads in a different language. He preached against the caste system, Vedas, priests, sacrifices, and emphasized moral and ethical principles. He discarded all mechanical beliefs in different forms of deities. Personal experience formed the basis of his teaching. He declared that there is no real substance in outer things and in the individual soul. He found the cause of suffering for all human beings and freely taught the way to get out of suffering. To him that was religion—to lead one to Nirvana, the eternal freedom. The religion he preached, which is known as Buddhism, dominated India for thousands of years. Through the influence of Ashoka, an emperor, the spread of Buddhism over China, Sri Lanka, and the Far Eastern countries came. In time, waves of foreigners came and entered India; the Tartars, Beluchis, Sakas, Huns; all with superstitions and hideous worships. They undermined the purity of Buddha's teachings, and the Vedic sacrifices were also discontinued.

People naturally needed a concrete religion that came through gorgeous temples with images. A

thorough purging was necessary in the society. There came another teacher, Shankaracharya. He is the embodiment of the essence of the Vedas, Vedamurti. He was born in 680 A.D. and he lived for thirty-two years, with an active life. He established four monasteries before giving up the body and reestablished in Hindu society the four stages of Hindu life. He wrote elaborate commentaries on the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. He converted the heretics and reformed the central principle of the Vedas through the path of knowledge and renunciation. He established the teaching of the divinity of man and the unity of existence called Vedanta.

This Vedanta proved to be useful for the intellectual aristocrats but not for the masses. There grew a tendency for philosophical discrimination and division. Thus, a belief came that knowledge is only for sannyasins. Brahmins alone could be sannyasins. Another teacher came in the form of Ramanuja. He was a wonderful person with a wonderful heart. He gave the mantra of bhakti for the salvation of all, including the low caste people and pariahs, through love and surrender to a personal God. Sri Chaitanya followed him to convert the masses through devotion and reconvert those numbers who had been forcefully converted to Islam. Islam preached the breaking of images and the doctrine of the one true religion. The Vedic religion was reeling under the blows of the sledgehammer of Islam. The eternal religion cannot die. A new synthesis was necessary. Chaitanya was a Brahmin, scholar and logician. His visit to Gaya revealed the futility of mere scholarship. He realized that devotion and bhakti were the surest ways to salvation, and this devotion could be cultivated by chanting the name of Hari. He preached this method to all, Hindus and Muslims alike. A large number of Muslims followed him. He preached the doctrine that caste and division in society were not necessary for the devotees of God.

The last period of Indian history thus approached: the conquest by the British in 1757 and its consolidation in 1857. The Indian people came in contact with the powerful and dynamic West through the Bible. People were alerted and became inquisitive, sceptical and rational. They were exposed to worldly values and enjoyments like drinking. The discovery of a new culture broke down many barriers of fanaticism and false notions. Technology brought this far-flung human society closer. Thus, the ground was prepared for the new synthesis and understanding which Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda brought. The Vedic values of the eternal religion were put into a new form in Sri Ramakrishna's unique teachings through stories and anecdotes based on personal experience. In modern times Swami Vivekananda was a bombshell at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. The Vedic values and teachings were presented for the first time to hundreds who came representing various religions of the world. He was India's spiritual ambassador to the World Parliament of Religions in 1893.

India's history is kaleidoscopic. It is a faithful witness to eternal spiritual laws, teaching peace and blessedness to all without distinction of caste, creed, or religion, because it teaches the one fundamental law: ONE GOD WITH MANY NAMES.

The Spirit of the Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita occupies a preeminent place in the religious and philosophical literature of India. It is one of the three canonical books, the other two being the Brahma Sutra and the Upanishads. These three form the pillars of Hinduism or Vedanta. Numerous commentaries have been written on the Gita by teachers and seers to suit their different viewpoints, but the theme and the philosophy propounded in the Gita transcends time and place. It is a dialogue between Sri Krishna, universally respected as a God-man, and Arjuna. The message given has served as a guide for spiritual seekers for more than two thousand years.

The setting of the Bhagavad Gita is the battlefield at Kurukshetra. Arjuna asks Krishna to bring his chariot to the no man's land between the two armies. As Arjuna thinks about the coming destruction of so many of his near and dear ones, he is overwhelmed with grief and wants to abandon his duty for the life of a recluse. The cause of Arjuna's confusion is an improper understanding of the two ideals, pravritti and nivritti—action and renunciation. These two ideals are primordial and underlie all creation. In society we come across two types of people, one predominantly active and one predominantly contemplative. The goal of action is happiness here and hereafter, and the goal of renunciation is liberation or freedom from all bondage. The active are very conscious of their bodies, egos, and duties and take the world as real. The contemplative, on the other hand, view the world as transitory and the body and ego as ultimately unreal. While the active are concerned with duties to family, society and gods, the contemplative discover the futility of action by carefully examining the nature of the world and seek the highest truth. Arjuna had to choose between harsh action and the peace of the recluse, and he did not know which path to take. Many of us face similar confusion when we confront the realities of life. The Gita offers a solution and is important for everyone who is faced with the problem of life.

The Gita's teachings begin with a statement about the soul. The soul is the pivot of our action and thought. If the soul is mortal, it will die with the body, and it is only natural for us to cling to life at all costs. If, however, the soul is immortal, we must learn to identify with it rather than the body through the practice of detachment. In chapter two the Gita points out that the soul is not born and does not die.

It (Self) is not born and it does not die
at any time.¹

He who thinks it to be a slayer and he
who thinks it is slain, both are ignorant;
it neither slays nor is slain.²

This (Self) is indeed incapable of being cut, incombustible, incapable of being moistened and of being dried; it is eternal, all pervading, stable, immovable, and primordial.³

The Bhagavad Gita presents a total philosophy of life and also gives the science of yoga. It is a manual of practical spiritual discipline. It discusses the nature of God, the universe, and creation. All this knowledge is necessary to lead a fruitful life. Arjuna was faced with the dilemma of whether he should fight to preserve the social order or retire into the forest. Sri Krishna analyses, step by step, the meaning of right action, disciplined action by which one performs one's duties and ultimately attains the highest goal—union with the supreme Self or God.

Therefore always perform action which has to be done, unattached; verily, man attains the highest by performing action unattached.⁴

No liberation is possible without the discharge of social obligations. We see action everywhere. The whole creation is sustained by action. Man and the outer nature are always active. Man has been created with the tendency to be active. It is a means for his welfare, both material and spiritual. Nobody can be without action for even a moment. Nobody can maintain himself or his body without proper action. Certain actions are mechanical; others are motivated by mental impulses; still others are done for creature comforts. Karma yoga, the science of action, teaches disciplined action with a spiritual end in view. Action done with this outlook creates harmony with the universe. It keeps the wheel of creation going. Our debts to various living beings are discharged through action. The whole world is sustained by the discharge of duties toward each other. Even the perfect souls are seen working for the preservation of society.

He who does not follow here this cycle thus set revolving, who leads a sinful life and delights in the senses, in vain, O Partha, does he live.⁵

But actions have a binding effect. They create tendencies and impressions on the mind and then man works impelled by necessity. He discovers that there is no freedom from the impact of action and its results. This bondage is overcome not by giving up action but by, performing it skillfully. This skill is acquired through evenness of mind, samatva. Work with evenness of mind.

Established in Yoga, O Dhananjaya, perform actions, giving up attachment, and unconcerned as to success or failure; equanimity is called Yoga.⁶

While working one should remain undisturbed by the results both good and evil. One may not always

succeed. If one is elated by success, he will be downcast by failure. Therefore, we have to develop sameness in the mind. The Sanskrit word “samatva” is very difficult to translate. Several translations are offered, such as sameness, indifference, evenness, and spiritual detachment. Whatever translation we may choose, samatva is a higher power of the mind, created by self-control.

How do we acquire this evenness? There are two elements in all voluntary actions. The first is an immediate feeling of pleasure or pain. These feelings are natural but impermanent. One should learn to endure them as they will pass away.

O son of Kunti, sense-contacts result in heat and cold, pleasure and pain. They are subject to coming and going and are transient; O descendant of Bharata, endure them.

O best of men, that wise person whom these do not afflict, who is the same in pleasure and pain, is fit for immortality.⁷

All noble people acquire the capacity to endure. They are seen to be indifferent to such items as food and clothing. The second element in action is the desire for result. It is argued that this serves as an incentive for action. Karma yoga teaches that action is an end in itself. The result will come, but one should have no longing for it. One should discover the joy of work—work for its own sake, not for power, position, or money. What follows is evenness of mind. Intense hankering for fruit is harmful for more than one reason. First of all, self-interest may blind us as to what is the right end. Second, even if we know what is right we may follow a wrong method. Therefore, one should not seek results. Even war is sometimes justified if it is for the welfare of humanity and is waged through compassion, like a surgeon removing a tumor.

The problem is how to reconcile action with renunciation. Higher spiritual disciplines preach renunciation; “Let the dead bury the dead.”⁸ But total renunciation is for the highly advanced soul. The active man should also practice renunciation, not by giving up obligatory actions because of delusion or because the world is troublesome, but by continuing to perform action without attachment to results and fruits. One should never hate a duty because it is disagreeable.

Better is one's own duty, though defective, than another's duty well performed. Death in one's own duty is better; the duty of another is fraught with fear.⁹

One should perform action and preserve the spirit of renunciation. Work strenuously but give up the selfish motive; not renunciation of action but renunciation in action. One should not disregard common duties but suppress selfish motives.

The following are some of the practical disciplines for the practice of renunciation:

1. The religious-minded, while acting, should think, “God is the doer and I am an instrument in his

hands,” thus surrendering the results, whatever they may be, to God.

Renouncing all actions in Me, with your mind resting on the Self, and giving up hope and idea of ownership, fight, being free from fever.¹⁰

You must remember God in all actions. God is in the soul of all beings. Gratification of God is the service of all living beings. The result is purification of the mind, preparing oneself for meditation, love, absorption, and, finally, liberation.

2. Those who have a tendency to follow the path of knowledge should discriminate between the self and the non-self. All actions are performed by the non-self. Self is the silent spectator.

But he who knows, O mighty-armed one, the truth as to the differentiation of the senses and their functions—he knowing that the Gunas or senses, rest in the Gunas or sense-objects, is not attached.¹¹

One should see non-action in action. By doing thus, one also gets purification of the mind.

He who sees inaction in action and action in inaction is wise amongst men; he is poised and a performer of all actions.¹²

The right duty is that deed which brings one nearer to God, Cosmic Reality, or the feeling of Oneness. Arjuna, in the end, understood the philosophy of action. His doubts regarding duty were resolved. He performed his duty with devotion and was not overwhelmed by grief. He destroyed the forces of unrighteousness and restored social order.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, there are two types of men in this world. In the Bible, one is represented by Martha and the other by Mary. Most of us are like Martha. Martha was conscious of her body, individuality, and ego. She felt social obligations. She thought it right to fight injustice and stand up against iniquity. Mary, on the other hand, was oblivious of ego. She had the conviction that God alone is real. Her love for God came out of this conviction. She was absorbed in serving Him; she had no other duty to perform. Even while performing duties we must look beyond the area of action and see deep into the soul and commune with God. Thus, the mind and the heart will be purified. The thought of individuality will slowly drop off. The devotee will become qualified for the supreme duty of life, that of taking refuge in the Lord alone. Through His grace such a devotee will obtain liberation and freedom, the supreme goal of life.

Kurukshetra—The Land of the Bhagavad Gita

About one hundred miles from Delhi, just off a modern macadamized road, is the ancient and historic site of the battle of Kurukshetra. Besides being the scene of the famous conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, as related in India's great epic, the Mahabharata, it has other claims to glory.

There in ancient times, on the banks of the Saraswati River, rishis chanted in sonorous tones the glorious Sanskrit of the Vedas; the gods themselves performed sacrifices and great sages realized the immortal Self. There were ashramas in Kurukshetra with thousands of students. These ashramas were like universities where the Vedic culture and philosophy as well as secular subjects were taught. Kurukshetra has existed from the earliest dawn of Aryan history in India. It was settled by one of the five original groups of Aryans who migrated into India thousands of years ago. Located to the northwest of modern Delhi, it comprised many villages and towns with its capital at Sthanviswara, now known as Thanesar. Sthanviswara may be translated as the place of Ishwara, or the land of God. For ages and ages pilgrims and devotees have cherished in their hearts its holy tradition, for Kurukshetra is the place where Sri Krishna taught the immortal truths of the Bhagavad Gita.

An ancient text relates that King Kuru, who was an ancestor of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas and whose date may be roughly calculated by studying the names of the kings from Yudhishthira (eldest brother of the Pandavas) back to Kuru as one thousand years before the battle of Kurukshetra, came to this land in a golden chariot and out of its gold made a plough. He borrowed Shiva's bull and Yama's buffalo and started to plough the earth. Soon Indra came and asked the king what he was doing. Kuru replied, "I am preparing the land for the cultivation of the eight-fold virtues." (This has reference to the disciplines of Yoga.) Indra asked, "Where is the seed?" And Kuru replied, "Oh, it is in my possession." Indra went on his way and Kuru returned to his ploughing. Then Vishnu appeared and asked the same questions Indra had asked. Again Kuru gave the same replies. But Vishnu said, "Give me the seed and I will sow it for you." Thereupon, King Kuru extended his right arm, and it was cut into pieces by Vishnu's chakra (invincible, circular-shaped weapon), and the pieces were sown in the field. In the same way, Kuru offered the rest of his limbs and, finally, his head. Vishnu was pleased with his sacrifices, blessed him, and disappeared. Then Indra, who had witnessed all this, returned and told Kuru that any boon he might ask of him would be granted. Kuru asked two boons: one, that this land would be a holy land and that it would be named after him; the other, that anyone dying here would go to heaven whether he had been a saint or a sinner. So, the land became known as the field of Kuru, or Kurukshetra and tradition holds it to be most holy.

Kurukshetra is as hoary with history as it is with legend and tradition. In fact, these combine to give it continuity from the most remote times until today. The date of the battle of Kurukshetra, which sets it on the historical stage, has, however, often been in question. In the Mahabharata there is a reference

made just before the battle took place, to certain inauspicious planetary positions, which, it was believed, foreshadowed unprecedented death and destruction on the battlefield. From this astronomical reference calculations have been made, and some people believe that the date of the battle of Kurukshetra is about 2500 BC, approximately 4,500 years ago. Other sources date it about 1500 BC. Whatever the date may be, we find that from the time of that devastating battle down to the end of the fifth century AD, Kurukshetra does not figure in the innumerable wars of conquest recorded in Indian history. We have to rely on tradition and the stray mention of it by writers and travelers. The invasions of the Persians (beginning of the fifth century BC) and of the Greeks (third century BC) as well as the incursions of other foreign forces do not appear to have affected Kurukshetra adversely to any great extent, for when Magasthenes visited it in about 300 BC he found it very prosperous. There was peace and plenty, and art and industry flourished under royal patronage. During the ascendancy of Buddhism it still retained its position as a great centre of Hindu culture. In fact, from about 270 BC to 470 AD, throughout the eras of the Mauryan Empire and the Gupta (Golden Age) Dynasty, Kurukshetra prospered both materially and spiritually. But towards the close of the fifth century AD when the Huns, the fierce barbarians who came from the steppes of Central Asia, overran parts of upper India, Kurukshetra was in the front line of defense. History tells us that the rulers of Thaneswar stand preeminent among the Indian kings who distinguished themselves in defending the country against the invaders. These incursions of the Huns continued during most of the sixth century until the outsiders were repelled. In the beginning of the seventh century (606 AD), King Harshavardhan of the royal house of Thaneswar came to power. He also took over the throne of the king of Kanauj after the assassination of that monarch by conspirators. Harsha has been described as a great warrior, a scholar, a patron of learning and a connoisseur of the arts. He was the author of several plays himself, and the well-known writer, Bana, was one of his courtiers. Bana described Thaneswar as a place of great wealth and religion, and he said that the atmosphere was full of the sound of Vedic hymns. During Harsha's rule half of the income of the State was given to the spreading of education and culture. The place was visited by scholars, students, and pilgrims from all parts of India. It was during the reign of Harsha that the Chinese traveler, Huien Tsang, visited Thaneswar, which then included the whole area of Kurukshetra. He wrote in glowing terms about the life there at that time. He found the government honestly administered and the inhabitants truthful and of pure moral principles. He said the city of Thaneswar had one hundred temples and that there was prosperous trade with other lands. The climate was good and the soil productive.

After the death of Harsha without heir, there were bitter contests for the empire he had consolidated, which stretched from upper India to Bihar and Orissa. Though the civil strife recorded in history for the next four hundred years is like a marathon chess game, which involved most of the kingdoms of India, Kurukshetra again seems to have been left to itself, probably because the capital of Harsha's empire had been removed from Thaneswar to Kanauj, and so Kurukshetra was not a political prize. We may presume that conditions remained more or less peaceful in that area, that it was not strategically important and that it was considered by all to be a holy land. However, when the Muslim invaders from the West began to pour into India from the eleventh century onwards, Kurukshetra was constantly involved in the struggles with the invaders. In fact, it experienced repeated invasions, occupations, and cruel domination by the foreign rulers. The great Rajputs, the valiant Sikhs, and the heroic Maharattas fought bravely against the enemies. The famous battles of Kaithal, Karnal, Thaneswar, and the three momentous battles at Panipet, all within the Kurukshetra area, inflicted great suffering. This reached its height during the reign of Aurangzeb (1658–1709), the

most bigoted of the foreign emperors, and lasted until the invasion of Ahmed Shah Durani (1761). The glorious and ancient temples of Kurukshetra were demolished, images were dashed to pieces, seats of learning were desecrated, and cities sacked. After these repeated and devastating onslaughts most of the inhabitants of the area at last migrated towards the Himalayas. Today, the area indeed looks like an old battlefield. Much of it is without trees, and for vast expanses one sees little cultivation. Here and there are large mounds of earth overgrown with wild grass under which, one feels, trophies of the wars could easily be found, if one but scratched the earth with a fingernail! There are temples and small shrines, but none of these is very old. However, they serve to remind us of the glorious past, as they are built on the ruins of the old. It is to the holy men and the sannyasins of ancient times that we owe what details we have today of Kurukshetra. They had no worldly goods to lose, and they had gone beyond fear, so they roamed about the area throughout the awful years, living in caves, where unmolested they could meditate in peace. These holy men marked with stones the places where shrines and temples had been, and occasionally they offered their worship to these. They retained and handed down to their disciples the history, which we now call tradition, of the holy land of Kurukshetra. Today, the visitor is shown the place where Karna, one of the greatest heroes of the Mahabharata, was killed by a powerful weapon from the mighty bow of Arjuna after one of his chariot wheels had sunk deep into the earth. Bhishma, the “grand old man” of the Mahabharata, grand uncle to both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, was fatally wounded during the battle, and like the true warrior that he was, he lay on a bed of arrows, there to expire like a hero. Bhishma asked Arjuna for some water with which to quench his thirst, but as Arjuna knew that he would not drink ordinary water, he pierced the earth with an arrow and out gushed a spring of pure, clear water. (This is an allusion to the origin of Bhishma, who was supposed to have been born of Ganga.) This spot is about three miles from the Kurukshetra tank and is called Bana Ganga. Before the battle of Kurukshetra the five Pandava brothers, in exile, spent some time in the Kamyaka Forest, and this is believed to have been on the site of the present town of Kamada. About five miles from Thaneswar is the village of Amin, situated on a huge mound. There, Dronacharya, the guru in warfare of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, used the military strategy called “Chakravyuha,” a surrounding tactic much like the pincer movement of the last war. It was there that Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna, lost his life. People say that the name of the village, Amin, is a corruption of his name. About one-half mile from this village is the place where Arjuna killed Jayadratha, who was responsible for the death of his son. Near Thaneswar is a Kali temple where, it is said, the Pandavas worshipped this form of the deity just before the battle. This temple is one of the fifty-two most sacred temples of the Devi.

Besides places associated with the battle of Kurukshetra, the area abounds in sites connected with other great traditional interests. One is shown the place where the ancient sages Vishwamitra and Vasishtha had their hermitages and practiced austerities. There is a cave, known as “Vasishtha’s cave”, with a sacred well nearby, where the ashes of the dead are sometimes put. It is claimed that Vamana, the Dwarf, or the fourth incarnation of Vishnu, was born near Amin. The immortal Parashurama, guru of Dronacharya, performed Vedic sacrifices in this area. One is told that the town of Kaithal (corrupted from Kapisthala—land of monkeys) is the birthplace of the great Hanuman, the heroic devotee of the Lord in his incarnation as Rama. These are only a few of the three hundred and sixty tirthas (ancient and holy places) within the area of Kurukshetra. As recently as 1948, a part of the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi was immersed in the Brahmasara Tank in Kurukshetra. Kurukshetra is visited by thousands of pilgrims every year, some on their way to the Himalayan shrines of Kedarnath and Badari Narayana. It is said that the great Sankaracharya stopped at Kurukshetra on his way to the

Himalayas, and this also adds holiness to it for the pilgrims of today. During solar eclipses hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all parts of India gather at Kurukshetra.

Although the ancient glories, the shrines, the temples, the great ashramas, the sacred forests, the holy rivers and ponds have disappeared or dried up and little trace of them is left, one particular spot is claimed to be much as it was some 3500 or more years ago. It, in fact, has always been considered as the most sacred spot in the whole of Kurukshetra. Three miles from Thaneshwar under a gnarled and very ancient Banyan tree, said to be the living witness of the event, is the place where, according to tradition, Sri Krishna, who had assumed the role of the charioteer of Arjuna, taught the immortal truths of the Bhagavad Gita. The Pandava army was approaching from Viratnagar in the west and the Kauravas from Hastinapur in the east, when Arjuna asked the Divine Charioteer to place his chariot in the middle of the field between the two opposing forces. The war-chariot of Arjuna, banners and ensign flying and drawn by four majestic white stallions keyed up for the fray, was brought to a sudden halt. Kings from all over India with their greatest warriors and armies had joined one or other of the combatants. Never before had so many great warriors gathered together. They were all in battle dress, protected by intricate armour, which glittered and shone like jewels. Their colourful costumes and turbans were beset with gems, some of fabulous value. It is believed by some that the great hero, Karna, wore as his turban decoration the famous diamond, later known as the Koh-i-noor, which had been given to him by Sri Krishna. The Pandava army consisted of seven divisions, that is, approximately 150,000 war-chariots, the same number of specially trained and armoured elephants, 450,000 cavalry and 750,000 foot soldiers. The army of the Kauravas consisted of eleven divisions. As these two massive armies were advancing towards the battlefield the blare of trumpets and the blowing of horns and conch-shells pierced the air time and again as each warrior's challenging blast was accepted and flung back from the other side. Colourful banners and flags were flying in the wind, cymbals were clashing, horses neighing, elephants trumpeting, and there was loud beating of war drums. The mingling of these mighty omens of battle was deafening. War had been declared, and as both sides awaited the commands of their leaders, there was comparative quiet again. When Arjuna, standing in his chariot between the two armies, saw his brothers, cousins, nephews, uncles, and other revered members of the two families, and all the other great warriors thus arrayed against each other, he lost all interest in the forthcoming battle. He could not bring himself to take part in the awful slaughter which was imminent. It was at this point that the immortal dialogue known as the Bhagavad Gita took place.

The Bhagavad Gita is considered by Hindus to be almost an encyclopedia of spiritual counsel. Many are the commentaries written by eminent scholars down the ages, highlighting and eulogizing particular aspects of the teachings, and various are the opinions as to which path is superior to the others. But Ramakrishna, who could pinpoint the most abstruse philosophies and reconcile diverse and conflicting opinions, has given us in one word the essence of the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. Sri Ramakrishna said that if you keep repeating the word "Gita", it becomes "t(y)agi." A tyagi is a man of renunciation, one who has renounced or surrendered himself to God. Whether God be considered as the Brahman of the jnanis, the Paramatman of the yogis, the Lord and Doer of all actions of the karmis, or the beloved Lord of the bhaktas; the individualized ego, the small self, must be surrendered, must be renounced. So, through the Bhagavad Gita Sri Krishna taught Arjuna the various ways one may surrender himself and all his actions to God.

As a climax to these teachings Sri Krishna gave Arjuna the vision of his universal form or the visual experience that all forms, all space, all time and all causality are in the Almighty Being. It was as if Arjuna suddenly saw a blazing Form which contained the whole universe. The sun, moon, stars and planets were only a small part of that one Existence which embraced everything that was or had been. In wonder he gazed and saw that within that resplendent One were myriads of faces, mouths, bodies, and limbs. All the gods, the ancient sages, the noble ancestors—everything was in that universal Form. Then Arjuna saw that the great warriors of Kurukshetra, his own kith and kin, with their chariots, horses, elephants, whole armies, all were being mercilessly crushed in the massive jaws of the universal Being, the Doer of all actions. In one mighty moment, past, present, and future were telescoped into one, and Arjuna stood face to face with timeless TIME. The impact of this staggering experience swept Arjuna into a mental whirlpool; his senses reeled, and he felt that he was being forsaken by his mind. He grasped for the memory of his beloved companion, counsellor, and guide, Sri Krishna, and with folded palms he implored the universal Being to show him again that gentle human form to which he was so happily accustomed. The infinite Being, infinite in might and in mercy, again assumed the form of the familiar Krishna, and Arjuna fell prostrate at his feet.

Tradition claims that this experience of Arjuna and the teachings imparted to him by Sri Krishna, which are recorded in the Bhagavad Gita, took place at Kurukshetra, under the ancient Banyan tree, believed to 'be the living witness of it all. The place is called Jyotishwara, which means the brilliance of the Light of God. It is called that because here Arjuna had the vision of the Resplendent One. Just beside the tree is a large pool of water and devotees believe that the pool of Jyotishwara still retains some of that splendour. True, it is unusually brilliant. The reflection of the sun on its waters is almost blinding. Perhaps science could give some reason for this phenomenon, but the accepted explanation has satisfied millions and millions of people for the last 3500 or more years.

Whether the Bhagavad Gita as we know it today was interpolated at some later date into the great epic of the Mahabharata, as some modern scholars think, is of little importance to those who love the Gita, for they "have come to eat the mangoes, not to count the leaves on the tree," to use an expression of Sri Ramakrishna. Epics were sometimes handed down from generation to generation long before they were compiled and put into script. The veracity or the antiquity of the actual happenings of the Gita are not affected by the date of its compilation. It may even be that the teachings of Sri Krishna took only a few minutes of time as we know it, somewhat like the experience Swami Vivekananda had when touched by his Master, Sri Ramakrishna; for the teacher was God, Himself, and the disciple, God's own counterpart. Tradition also holds to the belief that the sacred place where the Gita was enacted is Jyotishwara because, from time immemorial, great scholars, renowned sadhus and saints, and earnest devotees from all over India have made pilgrimages to Kurukshetra for the express purpose of reading, or hearing read, the holy Bhagavad Gita at Jyotishwara, under the ancient Banyan tree, beside the pool of the Light of God.

Buddha's Message of Peace and Enlightenment

One of the foremost of enlightened souls from Asia is Lord Buddha, whose message has been a great gift to the whole world. His birthday is called the Thrice-Blessed Day for on this very day in different years he was born, received enlightenment, and gave up the body. The message which he preached throughout his life was one of benevolence and love for all beings. His teachings are free from priestcraft, use of meaningless rituals, dry philosophical speculations, and unnecessary dependence on imaginary gods and deities. His philosophy is based upon the expression of Mahamaitri and Mahakaruna: unlimited friendship, unlimited compassion. Buddha's message originated in India and spread throughout the East, becoming the religion of Tibet, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Korea, Japan, and China. However, although Buddhism originated in India, it became extinct, as it were, in the land of its origin due to the unethical and corrupt practices of its later adherents.

In the West there are many admirers and students of the life of Buddha and the philosophy of Buddhism. Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* and the Rhys-Davies' many books, articles, and research are well known. During the first four decades of our present century and after World War II as well, many books and articles have been written on the subject. A vast literature is available for the sincere student of Buddha and Buddhism.

Buddha's life is shrouded in legends and anecdotes that are based on historical evidence, which is difficult to verify. But one great fact stands out in his life and character, and that is his great compassion for all suffering beings. He was ever ready to give up personal comforts and life itself to remove the suffering not only of human beings but of animals and beasts. The actual span of his life is accepted by historians as occurring between the years 563 B.C. and 483 B.C. After the child was born in the royal family, soothsayers predicted that the boy would either be a great king or a great ascetic. The father, himself the ruler of a small kingdom, brought up the child in royal luxury, deliberately shielding him from witnessing human sorrow and suffering. He was given proper training in the scriptures and warfare as befitting a prince, and when he came of age was married to a beautiful maiden. However, he had to live like a prisoner in the palace, surrounded by dance, music, and enjoyment.

One day, desiring to see the city, the prince manipulated this visit with the help of a charioteer. During his visit, he witnessed four sights which affected him profoundly. He saw one person suffering from disease, another from old age, and still another being carried to the cremation ground. These first experiences of suffering and death filled his heart with sadness. Lastly, he saw a monk—one who had renounced all attachment and seemed to be completely fearless and at peace. He returned to the palace.

During this period, his wife had given birth to a son, Rahula. Still, he was already pondering over his life of enjoyment and bondage. When the son was born, he exclaimed, "One more fetter has been put!" Out of this deep pondering came the great renunciation. He was not seeking escape from frustration or hardship, but he left his princely life, including wife and child, in order to seek the remedy for human suffering. We find similar circumstances in the lives of Christ, St. Francis, Sri Chaitanya, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and others. This is the real meaning of renunciation. After leaving the palace and crossing the royal boundaries, he exchanged his robes with a hunter.

At first he practised extreme asceticism, thereby reducing his physical frame to bones. As a result he attained some yogic powers and supernatural experiences. But this was not a satisfactory solution to the remedy for human suffering, for which he had left his princely life. He discovered that the asceticism which consisted of torturing the body was as unsatisfactory as living a life of luxury and worldly enjoyment. He therefore gave up the extremes of asceticism. Taking a more moderate approach (The Middle Path—Madhya Marga), he went into meditation under a bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. This period was a real struggle for him, but he successfully struggled with Mara (temptation) and triumphed. Just as all the great messengers of God in the past have had to go through a difficult period of trial before the final illumination, so too did Lord Buddha. In the four watches of one particular night, he discovered certain truths, namely, the cause of suffering (The Chain of Dependent Origination—Pratitya Samutpada), its origin, and how to end it once and for all. This victory made him Buddha, the Enlightened One. He discovered a state of consciousness and its method of attainment, which he wanted to give to all beings without exception.

Though Buddha's philosophy was quite distinct from rival schools then existing, which opposed him, he nevertheless preached with great success and carried his teachings to areas far and near. He was the first international preacher using love and compassion as his method of teaching about the attainment of enlightenment. While accepting the essential principles of Vedanta, he preached against what he saw as the unwanted dogmas in Vedic religion: the use of meaningless rituals, vain gods, and certain non-essential parts of the Vedas. In 483 B.C., he gave up the body and entered into Nirvana. In the fourth century B.C., the Emperor Ashoka became responsible for the spread of Buddhism in India and beyond.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHA'S TEACHING

The great practicality of Buddha's teaching was in its appeal to the universal condition of man's suffering. He taught that no human being is immune from bondage and its resultant suffering in daily life; yet anyone can achieve freedom from all suffering by following the practical methods as suggested by him. All great world prophets have shown the way to final deliverance. Buddha's creed was not one of despair but rather great hope that all men might overcome their condition and attain eternal peace and joy. He defined three types of suffering: Adhyatma, Adhidaiva, and Adhibhautika. He had no interest in hollow theological and philosophical discussions which had no direct bearing on the central problem of a human being. He held for no compromises with the physical demands of life. "O monks, just this I have taught: ill and ending of ill." For the purpose of overcoming suffering he did not recognize anything beyond experience in its most practical form. Everything else he rejected as idle curiosity:

And wherefore, my disciples, have I not told you that? Because, my disciples, it brings you no profit. It does not conduce to progress—progress in holiness—because it does not lead to the turning from earthly life, to the subjugation of desires, to the cessation of the transitory, to peace, to knowledge, to illumination, to Nirvana. Therefore I have not declared it unto you.¹

Even hearing such positive thoughts, how many take them seriously and work them out?

Many there are who do not even hear of Atman; though hearing of Him, many do not comprehend. Wonderful is the expounder and rare the hearer; rare indeed is the experiencer of Atman taught by an able preceptor.²

Instead, we see that a large majority of people take interest in such fruitless things as ghosts, mahatmas, healings, astral bodies, the stars and planets—believing that these will help them to attain spiritual experiences and end suffering.

METAPHYSICAL FEATURES OF BUDDHA'S TEACHING

Buddha's concept of peace and Nirvana is based on a firm and positive foundation regarding the self (or subject) and the universe (or object). There is no permanent reality behind either. This is the basis of practical Buddhism: Buddha's views of the self and the non-self. He advocated no permanent self. Mere sensations consisting of heat and cold, pain and pleasure, changing thoughts, of such is the body. They together constitute the self; there is no unchanging ground.

The whole physical world constitutes the non-self. There is no physical world as such except for sensations such as hardness, softness, blueness, etc. All these ideas and feelings do not come from any object. Even if they did come from real objects, still we could never know them. Thus, he preached the doctrine of the absence of a permanent reality for the individual and for the world. Things are constantly in a state of flux. The same man does not step into the same river twice. Existence is in a state of constant becoming, incessant activity. However, nothing new is produced. In the light of Buddha's teachings, how can we justify fighting either for an individual cause or for a nation? According to him, possessiveness and greed are the causes of war. All the great prophets have taught the same truths, but through different modes of expression.

The law that governs change, according to Buddha, is neither due to chance, uniformity of nature, or a supernatural being. All supernatural beings are denied. All changes are seen as arising out of a chain of dependent origination (Pratitya Samutpada), beginning from ignorance and ending in suffering. He discovered this law in deep meditation and put it into the following form:

That being present, this becomes.

That being absent, this does not arise.

From the presence of oil, flames arise. In the absence of oil, flames do not appear. From desire, suffering appears. In the absence of desire, no suffering is experienced. Due to the impermanence of objects, self-denial is vital in Buddhism. When the lower self or limited “I-consciousness” is discarded, the non-self, or world, also disappears.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Through Avidya or ignorance, we identify a permanent self with the body. Through this very Avidya we perceive the world outside ourselves as permanent and hence do not see the Noble Truths. All religions teach renunciation of the physical. Attachment is the cause of suffering. Elimination of this suffering is the main tenet of Buddha's teaching, leading to the Four Noble Truths:

1. suffering (duhkha)
2. cause of suffering (duhkha samudaya)
3. cessation of suffering (duhkha nirodha)
4. Eight-fold path (arya ashtanga marga)

These Four Noble Truths make the Buddhist religion most practical and naturally appealing for its millions of followers.

After these Four Noble Truths were revealed to him in deepest meditation, Buddha delivered his first sermon at Sarnath (near Benares) to five individuals who approached him. He knew that suffering could not cease without a spiritual experience, but he did not wish merely to discuss metaphysical theories. Thus, he did not teach anything about God or the soul or any sort of permanent entity. Existence of suffering is the practical experience of every individual. It is tangible and needs no proof. If the suffering is not physical, it is emotional. Man's life finally ends with old age and death. No one is immune from misery.

THE EIGHT-FOLD DISCIPLINES AND NIRVANA

Buddha discovered a causal chain of suffering (Pratitya Samutpada) having twelve links. These twelve links are ignorance (Avidya), Karmic impressions (Samskara), initial consciousness (Vijnana), name and form (Namarupa), six sense organs (Shadayatana), sense contact (Sparsha), feeling (Vedana), thirst for life (Trishna), mental clinging (Upadana), becoming (Bhava), birth (Jati), old age and death (Jaramarana). A vicious circle becomes established, but an end can be put to it. If we remove the cause (namely, ignorance) through right knowledge, the whole chain disappears. The Way to do it consists of eight Disciplines:

1. right view (samyak dristi)
2. right speech (samyak vak)
3. right resolve (samyak sankalpa)

4. right action (samyak karmanta)
5. right living (samyak ajivah)
6. right effort (samyak vyayama)
7. right thought (samyak smriti)
8. right meditation (samyak samadhi)

In each of these Disciplines self-effort is emphasized. Two of the Disciplines are given particular stress: right action, with the practice of truthfulness, non-violence, and contentment; and the second one is right concentration or meditation on the Four Noble Truths. Detachment from the material world is thereby created. This makes Buddhism a Kalyana Dharma.

Because of their practicality, there was a rapid spread of the teachings of Buddha. Philosophical teachings are too abstruse for the common masses. Ideas have to be given in a most simple and practical form so that as the masses are attracted to them, they develop the natural tendency to practise them. His teachings democratically appealed to the masses. They demanded no caste divisions, special privileges or priestcraft, and above all they promoted friendship (Mahamaitri) and love for all beings (Mahakaruna). As the mother loves her dear child without expecting anything in return, so did Buddha love the whole of creation and showed the way to deliver humanity from suffering, while he himself did not care for personal comforts or deliverence. He did not preach through use of the sword or force or political pressure, but through sheer love and gentleness. This is the Oriental way of preaching.

Nirvana literally means a “blowing out.” It is the cessation of the unceasing flow of sensations constituting the life of the self in the material world. Nirvana is the culminating liberation, the peace that passeth understanding. This culminating experience can be attained and its methods demonstrated as clearly as with any scientific experiment. Buddha's teachings were to “Come and see.”

BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM

The teachings of Buddha are not essentially different from the teachings of the Upanishads. Buddha is a follower of the path of knowledge (Jnana Marga). It is generally stated that Buddha rebelled against Vedic teachings. What he did was not to contradict the Vedas but rather transcend the lower teachings in the interest of the higher teachings of the Vedas. The Upanishads themselves declare that the Vedas cease to be Vedas for a man of Realization.

In this state a father is no father,
a mother no mother, worlds no worlds,
the gods no gods, the Vedas no Vedas.³

The Gita states that the well which serves the thirsty man also inundates the whole area:

To an enlightened Brahmana all the Vedas
are as useful as a tank when there is a
flood everywhere.⁴

For a beginner in religion, churches, temples, spiritual books, etc., are helpful and necessary, but

since the highest reality is supramental, all these articles cease to be meaningful at the ultimate stage of experience. Swami Vivekananda has stated that “It is very good to be born in a church, but very bad to die in a church.”⁵ This is the case with the Vedic rituals which Buddha is said to have denied. According to Hindu teaching, rituals are necessary in the beginning for the attainment of concentration, devotion, and a pure mind. But they ultimately drop away, as the scab drops off when the wound is healed. In later years, it is true, Mahayana Buddhists in Tibet adopted elaborate rituals as an essential part of Buddhism.

Buddha is also said to have repudiated the caste system. Hinduism accepted the caste system not as a dogma but for the sake of social organization and a smoothly-run society free of cut-throat tactics. The ultimate ideal is unity and not diversity. For a saint or realized soul, there is no caste. For the genuine devotees of God, there is no distinction of high and low, nor is there any repudiation of the world—for there is no longer a need to repudiate it—although this is attributed to Buddha and his teachings. To Buddha it is a fact that the world is unreal. To a Hindu, the Highest Reality lies behind the apparent universe which is an illusion. There cannot be an illusion without a reality behind it. Buddha advocates monastic life for all in order to attain Nirvana. Hinduism teaches that the highest truths can be realized by householders also, if each individual is fully devoted to his natural inclinations (swadharma), keeping an eye towards the goal supreme:

Devoted each to his own duty, man attains
the highest perfection.⁶

The ultimate Reality according to Buddha is Nirvana, while for the Hindu it is Brahman. They are not essentially different in content. Both concepts indicate the cessation of the changing phenomena of this universe, all names and forms. Buddhism has influenced Indian life for over two thousand years. Buddha was later accepted as an Incarnation and was absorbed into Hinduism, making the mother religion richer thereby.

Buddha's noble message of love and friendship is very essential for modern society. His teachings, if properly followed by any person belonging to any religion, will reduce the lack of love and goodwill so prevalent in this day and age. The significance of the Bodhisattwa's Prayer may well be studied by all:

May there never be any evil to anyone from me.
May all who attribute some offence to
me or who laugh at me or all who do
harm to me attain Enlightenment.
May I be a help to the helpless, a
guide to the traveller, a boatman for
those who want to go to the other side.
May I be a lamp to those who want it,
a bed for those who require it, a
servant of all.
I pray for the well-being of the universe.
May all beings see me with the eyes of a
friend.

May I see all beings with the eyes of a friend.

How and Where do You Seek for God?

From time immemorial, thinking men have been asking: “Who am I? From where have I come? Where am I going?” Many answers have been provided by scriptures and various philosophies throughout the history of civilization. Very rational, convincing and natural answers have been given by the Hindu scriptures—the Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, and Puranas. A thorough analysis of the universe, objective and subjective, has been made by individual sages and saints, who have presented their views to the people. We find very clear evidence of a search for an all-abiding reality not subject to deterioration and destruction. This eternal reality has been termed the imperishable Atman or Brahman. It can be realized in this very life, step by step, through experience and discipline. It is very interesting to study these disciplines as seen in the scriptures, made very easy of assimilation through stories and anecdotes, and to realize thereby the highest Truth in life.

We shall study two stories from the Chandogya Upanishad. Satyakama, the son of Jabala, approached the teacher, Haridrumata Gautama, for instruction. The teacher asked him about his family name and background (gotra). He did not know his background, so he returned to his mother and asked her. The mother replied:

I, who was engaged in many works and
in attending on others, got you in my
youth. Having been such, I could not
know what lineage you are. However,
I am Jabala by name and you are named
Satyakama.

Satyakama approached the teacher again and repeated all the information as he got it from his mother. Saying that none but a Brahmana could utter such damaging truth, Haridrumata accepted the boy as a student. The teacher gave Satyakama four hundred lean cows and asked him to go to the forest, attending on them until they were a thousand. After some years passed, one day while he was pursuing his daily spiritual schedule in solitude, Satyakama heard a voice through a bull. The bull said:

Dear boy, we have reached a thousand.
Take us to the house of the teacher.

The bull then instructed Satyakama about Brahman, saying:

East, West, North, and South are
embodiments of Brahman, but only
one quarter of Brahman. This indeed,

dear boy, is one foot of Brahman,
consisting of four parts, named the Radiant.

The bull said that fire would give Satyakama further instructions. The fire, which Satyakama had been daily tending with sacrificial oblations, spoke to him the next day, saying:

The earth is one part, the sky is
one part, heaven is one part, and
the ocean is one part. This indeed,
dear boy, is one foot of Brahman,
consisting of four parts, named the
Endless.

The fire, having instructed Satyakama on the first day of his return journey to the teacher's house, said that a swan would give further instructions on Brahman. The next evening, while tending the sacrificial oblations, Satyakama was instructed by a swan which flew to him.

Fire is one part, the sun is one
part, the moon is one part, and
lightning is one part. This indeed,
dear boy, is one foot of Brahman,
consisting of four parts, named the
Effulgent.

The swan said that a Madgu bird would give further instructions. The next evening, while tending the sacrificial oblations, Satyakama was instructed by the Madgu which flew to him.

Prana is one part, the eye is one
part, the ear is one part, and the
mind is one part. This indeed, dear
boy, is one foot of Brahman, consisting
of four parts, named the Repository.

After a long journey, Satyakama finally brought the cattle back to the hermitage. The teacher, on seeing Satyakama, exclaimed:

Dear boy, you shine like a knower
of Brahman. Who is it that has
instructed you?

Satyakama narrated the whole story, saying that teachers other than men had instructed him. He requested his teacher to instruct him, since such instruction brings the highest good.

I have definitely heard from persons
like your venerable self that the
knowledge directly learned from one's

own teacher becomes most beneficial.

The teacher then instructed Satyakama in the same things, with nothing omitted.¹

We learn many things from this story. The truthfulness of Satyakama shows the very important part that such a quality plays in building up spiritual life. Solitude and nature are very conducive to spiritual knowledge. We can learn high truths from various physical objects and living beings. Finally, the highest teaching, giving the completion of the experience of Truth, comes from a human teacher. It is the most effective step for changing one's life and character.

The next story is also from the Chandogya Upanishad. The story asks us to see Brahman, the Highest Reality, in everything. Upakosala, the student, lived for twelve years as a spiritual aspirant at the preceptor's house. Satyakama, the preceptor, had allowed other students to return home after their instructions but not Upakosala. Supposing that the fires would instruct Upakosala, he left on a journey. Upakosala was very much disappointed and depressed and went on a hunger strike. The preceptor's wife tried to persuade him to eat, but he would not. Finally, the sacrificial fires decided to instruct him.

This Brahmacharin has undergone severe austerities and has tended us properly; come, let us instruct him! Then they said to him, "Prana (life) is Brahman, Ka (joy) is Brahman, kha (ether) is Brahman."

Ka and Kha qualify each other. The terms are not meant in the physical sense. Space (ether) symbolizes the infinite and is also endowed with bliss (Ka). Three fires then instructed him separately. The Garhapatya fire said:

Earth, fire, food, and sun (are my forms). The person who is seen in the sun, I am he, I am he, indeed.

The Anvaharyapacana fire instructed:

Water, the quarters, the stars and the moon (are my forms). The person who is seen in the moon, I am he, I am he indeed.

The third fire, Ahavaniya, taught:

Prana, Akasa, heaven and lightning (are my forms). The person who is seen in the lightning, I am he, I am he indeed.

The fires gave Upakosala knowledge of the Atman, but said that the teacher would return and give the final teaching. When Satyakama finally returned, he saw Upakosala and exclaimed:

Dear boy, your face shines like that
of a knower of Brahman; who is it that
has instructed you?

Satyakama elaborated on what the fires had taught and gave the further instructions that by seeing Brahman within as the inmost soul, immortality and fearlessness is attained.²

We learn two lessons from this story. The story shows that the physical universe is an outward manifestation of God. God in His true nature is within the human being.

What do we learn from the Upanishads? “Verily, all this is Brahman.”³ The world is not to be repudiated in its real essence. It is Brahman. This same spirit dwells in man, fire, water, space, etc. “He is all-pervasive...”⁴ He Himself appears as all. He is present in everything.

Sometimes we are told the world is evil. We should rather believe that something is wrong with us, for we can remedy that. To say that the world is wrong is a terrible idea, for it implies that we cannot change it. Such an attitude leads to mental breakdowns, insanity, suicide. How can we get rid of evil? Must we renounce the world? In that case, the treatment is more drastic than the disease. If there is a mosquito sitting on your head, must you give such a blow to get rid of it that you end up with a headache for yourself? Still, we hear from all the scriptures that we should renounce. “You cannot serve both God and mammon.”⁵

To realize the truth, we must give up error. In order to attain the goal, we must give up evil. This is what any spiritual discipline which speaks of renunciation requires—control of body and mind (Viveka and Vairagya). According to the Bhagavad Gita, lust, anger, and greed are the gateways to hell. The real meaning of renunciation is to give up this worldliness. Under the spell of ignorance, we take the world to be real. The worldly ego consists of selfish desires and possessiveness. The worldly ego says: “This is mine.” The spiritual seeker realizes that “All this is Thine.”

Any object, either animate or inanimate, hurts a seeker if he lusts after it. Wealth is harmful if one is greedy about it. Lust and greed are harmful attitudes existing in our mind. Three persons may look at the same object in three different ways. One feels joy, another resentment, and the third, indifference. Sri Ramakrishna used to see the Divine Mother in every form. This is not a shallow optimism but rather based on true experience. “All this should be covered by the Lord.”⁶

We should not run away from or deny the existence of evil but rather should see God in everything. Then, evil will disappear. By spiritual discipline and practice, we have to see God's presence through death and pain. This attitude will relieve us from terror and fear. To give up feelings of attraction and repulsion towards objects is to attain relief from terror and fear. To be religious, one is not required to give up wife and children. One can understand real love by perceiving the presence of God in them.

It is not for the sake of the husband, my
dear, that he is loved, but for the sake
of the Self. It is not for the sake of
the wife, my dear, that she is loved, but
for the sake of the Self. It is not for

the sake of the sons, my dear, that they are loved, but for the sake of the Self. It is not for the sake of wealth, my dear, that it is loved, but for the sake of the Self.⁷

The lives of Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother are the examples of this ideal for the modern age. When asked by the Holy Mother how he looked upon her, Sri Ramakrishna replied:

The Mother who is the Deity in the temple, the Mother who gave birth to me and now resides in the Nahabat—even She is now massaging my feet. I look upon you in that light—as the embodiment of Motherhood.⁸

She lived with him as an attendant, disciple, wife and always a nun, and Sri Ramakrishna always remained an ideal monk.

We must give up the world which, through ignorance, we have taken to be real. The world in which one sees hatred, jealousy, attachment, and aversion is called Maya. These attitudes are propensities in our own minds, not in the world. We may not know the “how” or “why” of Maya, but once we see it as Maya, it will disappear. A boy once covered himself with a leopard skin and tried to frighten the night watchman. The watchman cried: “What! I recognize you. You are our Jimmy.” Jimmy laughed and went away. We see a magician sometimes swallow terrible objects. We enjoy the show. But why must we waste our time in discussing with our friends: “How did he do it?” It is magic, just a show, and thus, we may dismiss it.

We suffer in this world when we have the desire to possess things. If the desire is unfulfilled, we feel miserable. If there is no desire, there is no suffering. However, does it mean that we should be like a wall or a chair, a piece of inert matter with no desire whatsoever? At the same time, all religions teach us to give up desire:

Go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me.⁹

Then what is the meaning of giving up desire? Here again, we apply the teachings of the Upanisads: “All this should be covered by the Lord.”¹⁰ We have to give up a restrictive, narrow attitude. Spinoza used to say that one should look at things from the standpoint of Eternity, not from the standpoint of relative time. Have all you want: wealth, property, friends, food, clothes; but remember, they all belong to the Lord. Give up possessiveness—”I-ness.” “Do not covet anybody's wealth”¹¹ We have to give up selfishness and feel like God—with nothing to possess, nothing to give up. Vedanta does not ask us to seek an escape from the world by running away to the forest. Some of the teachers of the Upanishads have been householders. Vedanta is not a philosophy of non-activity, for the Lord is ever

active:

These worlds would perish if I did
not do action.¹²

Buddha, Christ, Sri Ramakrishna, and Swami Vivekananda were tremendously active. They showed how to work without any selfishness. This unselfish attitude—to work for the spiritual welfare of the world—is work entirely free from ego, work seeking no return. They also show how, when a human being suffers, it is God who is suffering, for the sake of man. This suffering makes God incarnate. It is His suffering.

We must give up a “shopkeeping mentality.” When we work, we are always asking the question inwardly, “How much will I get from this?” This desire for return deprives us of the real joy of work. Who enjoys a great picture being auctioned off? The seller who wants the maximum profit or the buyer who wants to pay a minimum? Both are tense. They do not enjoy the picture. But there is a Witness, the One not interested in buying or selling. He looks at the picture and enjoys it the most. Have that Witness-consciousness. That will bring relaxation. The whole world is a beautiful picture with family, friends, the many individuals in society all making a part of the picture. If we could successfully eliminate the selfish motives behind our actions, we would really enjoy our work in the world. Sri Ramakrishna was always an embodiment of happiness. His ecstatic smile never left him, even in sickness, and he transmitted this joy to all others.

How should we spiritualize the world? We do not really spiritualize it, for the whole world is a manifestation of God, but rather we spiritualize ourselves. We must remove from our minds all attractions and repulsions, all greed, lust, and all attachments. Then this very world will be seen as God.

Seen through the gross senses, the world consists only of matter. Seen through the mind, it consists of desires and ideas. Perceived by Spirit, it is Spirit. The lake of Spirit is within us always, only veiled sometimes by the waves of desires. If we could restore our sense of equilibrium and discover the calmness and stillness within ourselves, we would see God, both within and without. There is, therefore, the need for daily meditation and spiritual practice. “Seek and ye shall find”¹³, is also shown in the Chandogya Upanishad: “Even so, in this world, that person knows who has a preceptor. And for him, only so long is the delay as he is not liberated (from the body) and then immediately he is merged in Being.”¹⁴ This reveals that we need the daily practice, and that we must learn the technique from a spiritual teacher and guide.

We see two extremes in the present day world. One common attitude is to plunge headlong into a foolish hedonism and enjoyment. “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” This idea appeals to many nowadays. The threat of nuclear war and the possibility of universal annihilation causes many to develop the attitude: “Enjoy as much as you can, while you can.” The second extreme is to curse the world, run away from society and go to the forest. By killing all social feelings, one only becomes dried up. Both these extremes miss the mark. If the world is bad, we must realize that we have made it so by our wrong thinking. We can see a beautiful world by developing the proper frame of mind. There is no peace in a wilderness. We should not try to imagine that God is to be sought in the clouds or some other faraway place. This world is the highest manifestation of God. The human

body is God's Temple. The soul residing in the body is God Himself. Therefore, work is worship. Service to the world is the highest worship. This is the best discipline for the present age.

How to actually realize the ideal? We read about it and are thrilled to hear it. But we forget, and if someone hurts us, we are at once ready to retaliate. We fail to see God in him but see a devil instead. We have to persevere and not give up the ideal. Noble thought is the true measure of greatness. We can be as great as we think. Our actions may be conditioned by our education, environment, and heredity. We may often do something in spite of ourselves that we later regret. But nothing should limit our thinking. Let us, therefore, fill our minds with the highest thoughts, not minding our failures. Every time we fail, we must lift up our mind again. Gradually, our actions will change for the better and will conform to our ideal thoughts.

If we are unable to see God in everything, let us see Him in one thing which appeals most to our minds and make that the springboard. Gradually, our consciousness will get transformed. Thus, we shall discover that God is manifesting Himself through all goodness, love, and beauty. He pervades the whole universe and is the inmost Self of all.

Steps to Spiritual Fulfilment

Fulfilment is a continuous process. One step develops into the next and culminates in the final stage, called fulfilment. These are also the stages of spiritual growth. They can be compared to three spans of a bridge, one leading to the other. The stages are rituals, meditation, and knowledge or illumination. Illumination is the final goal, beyond which nothing is left to realize. In the language of the Upanishads, they are called karma yoga, upasana, and jnana. These three disciplines constitute the principles taught in the Vedas. They are also present in varying degrees in all the religions of the world. Let us try to examine them one by one.

Rituals emphasize physical activity in the concrete forms of worship, such as kneeling down, waving of lights, or prostration. The result of rituals is the enjoyment of material happiness in this life and its extension in the next life, because these results come as an effect of action through the grace of deities or higher powers. According to the law of karma, good actions bring good results and bad actions bring bad results. The deities, higher powers, and supreme spirit are all related and not fragmented. The deities control life on earth. Human beings propitiate them through offerings in worship or in sacrificial oblations and derive the results from them. An average man seeks material happiness, such as abundant food, earthly possessions, children, property, and long life. Non-believers confine this happiness only to earth. The spiritually inclined extend it to include the heavenly world. All religions believe in heaven, as an extension of life after death. It is the same happiness, extended, without any struggle or obstructions as we experience them in earthly life. It is conceived of as being of long duration and is attended to with the favour and blessings of the higher powers. It is also an outcome of ritualistic worship. Rituals are observed in all religions of the world. They are emphasized in Hinduism, Judaism, Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Mahayana Buddhism, Protestantism, Jainism, and Islam. There are different postures and gestures of the body, but the spirit is the same, namely holy communion with God.

Rituals can be performed in two ways, either mechanically or with attention to meaning. You may move your body, sing hymns, recite scriptures, admire flower arrangements or music, or admire the hats and dresses of others. Even such mechanical rituals produce good results, such as the fulfilment of material desires on earth and after death. The immediate desires are fulfilled early. But since they are all effects of actions, they come to an end because all that is produced from a cause has an end.

Having enjoyed the vast world of heaven,
they return to the world of mortals on
the exhaustion of their merits; thus
abiding by the injunctions of the three
Vedas, desiring objects of desires they
go and come.¹

Life on earth cannot avoid pain, suffering, and death. In a competitive society, one is always discontented, seeing others enjoying great happiness. Thus a ritualist gradually becomes disillusioned about gross enjoyments and the like. But ritualistic worship is also a means to know the truth gradually. That is the first span of the bridge we spoke of. In the beginning, one should not fail to attend church, follow the dogmas, and even worship mechanically, saying the prayers without understanding their meaning. All these things put together create a spiritual impression, and it gradually erodes the hard crust of layers of material impressions and attachments. It develops a proper attitude through inquiry.

The second span of the bridge is upasana, or meditative worship and rituals joined with meditation. They are not purely mechanical. We saw that purely ritualistic worship done mechanically creates in the long run disillusionment about material pleasures. The spiritual atmosphere makes the mind introspective. One is not completely non-attached or desireless, but one is steered towards more permanent and lasting happiness. At the same time one knows that this is not possible on earth. Therefore one seeks new discipline.

One essential condition is calmness of mind. This is attained through upasana, which is marked by a predominance of mental activity. In ritual worship the mind is scattered; it goes from one object to another, such as flowers, hymns, arrangements, mudras, etc. There is no firm support in one direction. Meditation or upasana supplies firm mental support. The mind dwells intently on the object of worship. We say that one is absorbed in worship. One is undisturbed by any foreign thought. The object of worship is either a deity or a Personal God, approved by the scriptures and taught by the teacher. The method of upasana must be taught by the teacher to be accepted on faith. Every church or temple prescribes its own discipline. Reason cannot tell us about the Personal God or life after death; these are supersensuous categories. The teacher must follow the spirit of the scriptures, which contain past spiritual experiences. The disciplines and directives must not contradict the scriptural authority. At the same time, the scriptural authority should be harmonious with the light received from reason. Our impure mind is likely to make a caricature of the discipline if it is not guided by the scriptural aid and instructions from the teacher.

There are various types of upasanas or meditations. They depend upon the level of our mind and the desires inside. One can concentrate on the worship itself or the meaning of its accessories: the Catholic will contemplate on the mass or holy communion, the meaning of bread and wine, the cross as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, Easter as a symbol of the resurrection and the triumph of life over death or the spirit over matter. In Hindu rituals, we are asked to feel the presence of the deity in the image or symbol and to feel that the deity is eating the food or resting. If one has the required faith and earnestness, one can actually see this. Sri Ramakrishna actually perceived Mother Kali partaking of the offerings, talking with him, and walking with him. Is it imagination or actual experience? It can be both. The actual experience comes out of spiritual life based on moral disciplines, prayer and meditation. They transform life and a new world opens up. Imagination, in the long run, converts itself into tangible experience if it is based on deep faith, supported by reason.

Another contemplative method which is very useful as upasana or meditation is called manasa puja, or mental worship. We use it in ritualistic worship. Physical things, such as the seat, sacred leaves, light, bells, and fan, can be mental also. The seat, for example, is the heart; incense is the life breath; different flowers are compassion, forgiveness, knowledge, humility, and charity. Through this method, the whole of the personality of the worshipper is transformed slowly and steadily in the spirit

of total identification. Another mental worship is meditation on OM. It represents the three aspects of Godhead: Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer. Still another type of meditation is one on the form of the Personal God with attributes, such as the creator of the universe, the fulfiller of desires, the omnipresent one who sees through all eyes, hears through all ears, eats through all mouths, etc. This is called cosmic worship.

Illumination or knowledge is acquired through gradual stages. An ignorant man does not believe in the scriptures but follows natural impulses, and the result is momentary happiness followed by suffering. But when the desires are controlled by spiritual laws, they are gradually sublimated. Scriptures permit the fulfilment of desires for beginners. When they are fulfilled, the student's faith in the deity and in higher worlds deepens. With the deepening of faith, men worship the deities. Their minds become purer and more reflective. They thus come to the Personal God, the Preserver, Creator, Saviour. Through His grace they cherish only one desire, and that is for liberation. They realize the limitations of rituals and upasanas. The devotees argue, "How can I think of all-pervading spirit in an image? How can we place him who supports the universe on an altar? How can I gratify him in whom all desires are fulfilled by giving an offering? Why should we offer him flowers who is impersonal? Why offer him jewels who is the source of all beauty? How can we salute him who is without a second? How can we please him with hymns whom even the scriptures cannot reveal? How can we install an image of him who is present everywhere?"

O Lord, in my meditation I have attributed forms to Thee who art formless. O Thou Teacher of the world, by my hymn I have, as it were, contradicted that Thou art indescribable. By going on pilgrimage I have, as it were, denied thy omnipresence. O Lord of the universe, pray, forgive me these threefold faults committed by me.²

Now begins the third span of the bridge. All the different disciplines are for the attainment of illumination. They appear to be difficult for the beginners who are still filled with desires and are attached to the world, but they are easy for those who have gone across the first and second spans with the help of a qualified teacher and have realized the impermanence of all material enjoyments and values. This experience can be acquired with keen intellect, stern willpower, and determination. The four main disciplines are:

1. Discrimination between the real and the unreal, the permanent and the impermanent, both for objects seen and for those heard of in the scriptures, such as heaven and heavenly pleasures.
2. Non-attachment or renunciation. From experience the individual knows that no enjoyment or experience on earth is satisfying. Thus he creates the depth of renunciation.
3. Restraint of body and senses and withdrawal of the mind from the outside world through faith, forbearance, and contemplation.
4. Intense longing for illumination, like a man submerged in water, gasping for breath.

These are the characteristics of spiritual aspirants entering the third span.

The teacher then gives him a mantra, such as “Tat Tvam Asi – Thou Art That.”³ The student reflects on its meaning and gradually understands that he is pure spirit and God is pure spirit. He dissociates himself from being the body, senses, and mind. He dissociates God from being the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, and finally an identity between the two is completely realized on a purely spiritual plane.

This is knowledge or pure illumination. The next step is complete freedom from ignorance, which projects I-consciousness and world-consciousness, including heaven. The great soul is completely free, like a chick from the shell. He is awakened from sleep which had created the dream of the body, mind, family, and country. He is bathed in light. As long as the body survives, he remains undisturbed by pleasure and pain, honour and dishonour, and is devoted to the service and welfare of others. At the time of death his soul, freed from its imprisonment in the body, merges in the cosmic soul. This is the goal of human evolution and spiritual striving. This is mukti or complete fulfilment.

Steps to Spiritual Experience

Swami Vivekananda defines religion as “realization.” It is being and becoming, not a mere belief in certain dogmas or a bundle of good habits. Sankaracharya insists that freedom from bondage cannot be obtained without the realization of the identity between the individual self and the cosmic Self (Brahman). In the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus speaks of the practical application of this theoretical teaching as follows:

Therefore, whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock...And every one that heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell. And great was the fall of it.”¹

Realization is perfection. It has to be attained in this very life. The lower nature has to be changed and the higher manifested. Ego, passions and greed have to be slowly brought under control and channelled towards a higher ideal. It is a very slow and laborious process. A single example will convince us how patience and constant effort are necessary. Take the practice of control of the mind, which is most essential for any spiritual experience. When we sit for meditation or worship and try to concentrate our mind, we find that the mind doesn't become steady even for a single minute.

Arjuna had the same problem. When Sri Krishna explained the disciplines of yoga to him, Arjuna exclaimed that it seemed easier to catch hold of the moving wind than to control the restless mind. Sri Krishna replied that, though the mind is restless and hard to control, it can be brought to steadiness through regular practice (abhyasa) and detachment (vairagya). It is like emptying a lake drop by drop. It requires infinite patience and constant vigilance. The two main enemies in this process are sloth and inadvertence.

Some spiritual aspirants seem to stumble upon spiritual experience. Many a seeker of religion goes after various teachers asking for powers and quick results, but there is great danger in this. Usually, they turn out to be fanatics. Some, perhaps, experience harmful effects on their body or mind. It is like a poor man winning a lottery. The joy is so powerful that the weak nerves and mind cannot stand that outburst. Therefore, a seeker of spiritual experience must go step by step, making his body, nerves and mind fit and strong by discipline. Sri Ramakrishna tells the story of Mathur Babu's asking for

quick visions:

He (Mathur Babu) sent for me. When I went I found that he was, as it were, a different man: his eyes were red and tears were flowing; speaking of God he was shedding floods of tears. And his heart was trembling with quick pulsation. When he saw me, he clasped both my feet and said, ‘Excuse me, father, I admit my defeat; I have been in this condition for the last three days; I cannot apply my mind to worldly affairs in spite of all my efforts; everything is getting spoilt everywhere. Please take back the ecstasy conferred by you; I don't want it.’ ‘Why,’ said I, ‘did you not pray for ecstasy?’ He then said, ‘Yes, I did so and there is also bliss in it; but of what avail is it? Everything is going to be spoilt on this side. This ecstasy of yours, father, becomes you only. We don't want all these things. Please take them back.’ I then laughed and said, ‘I told you so previously.’ ‘Yes, father,’ said he, ‘but did I understand then so clearly that something like a ghost would possess me and that I should have to take every step according to its whim all the twenty-four hours and could do nothing, even if I had a mind to?’ I then passed my hand over his chest.”²

Why do we fail? It is interesting to explore the reasons why we fail in spiritual endeavour. If we carefully analyze our daily life of spiritual practice, we often discover that there is some flaw in the discipline. Just as a builder of a house or a doctor treating a patient has to be very careful from the beginning to achieve their respective goals, and even a little flaw in the building or the treatment may defeat their purpose completely, similarly, a seeker of spiritual truth has to go step by step very carefully, securing each step before he goes to the next. We are often enamoured of the ideal when we hear from the scriptures such sentences as “Aham Brahmasmi—I am Brahman.”³ It sends an emotional thrill through our body, but we forget that this is a transcendental experience in which body and world are left behind.

Thus we find that one has to deal with obstacles and enemies in the path by studying them, knowing their power, and slowly overcoming them. No one can call himself an emperor without subduing his

enemies and possessing control of the surrounding kingdoms. In order to acquire hidden treasures, one has to do the laborious task of excavation, removal of debris, putting forth hard labour, until the treasure is brought to hand. Mere theoretical knowledge does not help us nor give us satisfaction. By merely drawing a line on a piece of paper, we cannot get the satisfaction nor utility of building a wall.

Take another example. Nowadays it has become a fashion to speak of the harmony of religions. However, most of the religious leaders mean by harmony of religions religious “get-togethers,” interfaith dinners with a pat on the back given at the end. We forget the deep meaning involved in harmony of religion. The whole personality has to change before the idea of harmony can be experienced. Sri Ramakrishna practised the harmony of religions for almost twelve years of his life. He prepared himself by his many spiritual disciplines of various Hindu sects and other religions to demonstrate through his teachings the concept of the harmony of religions. The analogy he gives of the circumference and the centre of the circle illustrates the real meaning of religious harmony. There are many points on the circumference, but the circle has one centre to which all the points are connected. Thus the various manifestations of religious customs and beliefs all radiate from one centre in which all the various manifestations are connected: Brahman or the Godhead.

Perfection is defined in various ways by scriptures and world teachers. The three chief ways to reach perfection are by following the path of non-dualism (Advaita), qualified non-dualism (Visishtadvaita), or dualism (Dvaita). The ultimate experience to be realized is the same: effacement of individuality, transformation of the personality from human to divine, and constant communion with God in the form of service to human beings as the veritable manifestation of the Lord Himself.

Steps to realization, or spiritual disciplines, have some universal characteristics. The difference is only in emphasis, which varies according to an individual's temperament and level of understanding and according to the necessities of time and cultural environment. Let us take a few examples:

The teachings of Jesus's “Sermon on the Mount” give emphasis to ethics in human relationships: how to treat your neighbour, how to overcome lower propensities, such as killing and anger, through the higher disciplines to be learned and practised, such as love, charity and goodwill.

Vedanta, while accepting all these, adds an intellectual discipline for evolving the deep spiritual layers of the human personality. It lays down such preparations as viveka (discrimination between the real and the unreal), vairagya (detachment), sama-dama (control of the mind and senses), titiksha (bearing capacity, fortitude), and sraddha (attainment of religious faith through reason). This is accomplished by pointing out to the student the following universal facts of daily life: all material objects belong to time and space. They originate, stay for some time, dismantle or decay, and disappear. One should have possessions or objects only for maintenance of the body, because the sense-organs, if they lose control, carry away the equanimity of the mind and thus disable the student from attaining and realizing God. Certain things, such as incurable disease, vagaries of nature, and old age, cannot be changed. We have to accept them and live with them in a spirit of equanimity. But there are many other facts which can be changed with courage and discipline, self-effort, and constant struggle or longing for self-knowledge.

Another path, that of devotion or Bhakti, has the same characteristics. Scriptures of devotion, such as the Bhagavata, Narada Bhakti Sutras, and others, lay emphasis on the pure emotions which develop through two stages. The devotee begins by practising such disciplines as taking pure food, singing

devotional music, repeating the Lord's name (japa), meditating and worshipping at a shrine. Through these disciplines he attains to the higher love of God, experiencing love of God for His own sake, just because He is the highest ideal, rather than for any expectation of reward or fear of punishment. The lover, Beloved, and God's love become one.

The Bhagavad Gita lays stress on practical renunciation and detachment for the attainment of God-realization. One is not to give up his daily work but rather to dedicate this work to God. Instead of working for any selfish end, the devotee works as an instrument in His hands in a spirit of self-surrender to His Will. This spirit ultimately leads to purification of mind and heart, and thus creates inspiration, development of intuition, and power of meditation on God.

The path of Raja Yoga lays emphasis on the attainment of mental harmony or peace of mind through the following eight steps: 1. yama (non-injury, truthfulness, non-covetous-ness, continence, and non-receiving of gifts), 2. niyama (internal and external purification, contentment, austerity, study, and worship of God), 3. asana, that is physical observances of bodily control and good posture, 4. pranayama or breath-control; and four successive mental exercises, 5. pratyahara or withdrawal of the mind from material objects, 6. dharana or concentration, 7. dhyana or meditation, and 8. samadhi or absorption in the object of meditation.

The four requisites which are more or less applicable to all spiritual aspirants are: 1. scriptural study, 2. a spiritual teacher, 3. personal enthusiasm in sadhana, and 4. patience and perseverance.

The scriptures contain the recorded experiences of seers and saints who have sought and realized the truth. Such writings are considered very sacred. They are helpful in preparing us for the ultimate experience. Spiritual life is like sailing in an uncharted sea where there is little help from the senses, from one's own reason, or from values of society. Scriptures are like charts of navigation. They warn us of sandbanks, shallow water, submerged rocks, and icebergs. Scriptures describe the nature of God. They can be tentatively accepted as hypotheses and then realized through practical experience, and, hence, should be read with reverence. Since the scriptures give discipline and guidance to all, one has to make a distinction between essentials and non-essentials and use only those which are applicable in individual cases. Scriptures are the means and not the end. After getting the necessary guidance, one realizes the highest and transcends the scriptures, but he still maintains his reverence for them.

Spirituality is the awakening of the inner truth or soul within, the kindling of the spirit. It is the transmission of Light from one living soul to another living soul, much as one candle becomes lighted by the light of another candle. It is a new birth. One can get tangible spiritual experience when one comes in contact with a living teacher. Such an experience remains throughout life. Just as we need teachers in all the departments of our life—art, music, science, practical matters—so, too, do we need a true God-realized teacher. The essential factor is that one should be a proper student first; then the proper teacher comes automatically.

Individual effort must be sustained through inspiration and a sense of determination. Otherwise, it tends to become spasmodic. Sri Ramakrishna gave several beautiful examples to illustrate this point. A bee always seeks the flower and the nectar in the flower (right effort), while a fly seeks to alight on filth. A water drop falling on a hot pan dries up instantaneously (preparedness). A farmer irrigating his field will not take rest and relax until he removes all obstacles in the path of the current of water so that it can reach the field (determination). The lives of the saints should be regularly read. How

often they failed before they finally reached their goal, but still they never lost enthusiasm! Enthusiasm must not be confused with mental restlessness. The latter is characteristic of a lower mind which is unable to concentrate for any length of time. Enthusiasm in spiritual life has to be cultivated by studying the impermanence of this world and by taking refuge in the Lord alone. At a certain stage of development the soul feels this irresistible attraction to God and constant desire to know the truth. When the mental impurities are removed, God is realized.

The time factor (kala), or patience, is very necessary in spiritual life. Many past tendencies lying hidden in the subconscious have to be overcome through regular discipline. A great struggle must go on for which infinite patience and perseverance are required. One should be ready to work for eternity. The result may come much quicker than the devotee would expect, for the joy is in striving. The struggle proceeds in stages, much as the lawyer's defence of his client goes step by step, with arguments and facts marshalled, to prove his points and final conclusion before the judge. A true devotee is never impatient. One should do all that one can and then leave the rest to God. If we have the prerequisites, the result will come as a matter of course.

Individual Effort and Divine Grace

Of all the factors which play a part in building up religious and spiritual life, none is as powerful as divine grace. There is another important factor, which is connected to divine grace, and that is self-effort. There are many misconceptions and wrong notions about these two aspects of spiritual life. In the following article we will try to discuss their individual traits, their inseparable connection, and their ultimate identity.

It has been stated by those who study human nature that human beings should aspire to reach the highest values by, first, understanding them, then trying to practise those laws of behaviour that lead towards the highest, and ultimately by experiencing them. In understanding these laws, three tests have been given by teachers of the past. The first is the scriptures (shastra), the second is reason (yukti), and the third is experience (anubhava). All three of these tests are important. None of them can be neglected. If we depend entirely on the scriptures as the guiding principle, without taking the help of reason and experience, we will become narrow and dogmatic.

In realizing the highest good, two principles play a very important part: the ascent of man and the descent of God. One requires self-effort and the other implies divine grace. A great deal of confusion is present in individual and social life when we try to apply these two principles. There tend to be two extremes, with one view saying that everything is attainable by self-effort, and the other view saying that nothing can be achieved without the grace of God. Now, it will be discovered in analyzing the subject that both these extreme views are erroneous. It has been found that although those who depend entirely upon self-effort do sincerely try to develop themselves on ethical grounds, they land in constant struggle, discover that they are surrounded by infinite problems, and become discouraged. Their minds are disturbed and in constant flux, and there is no inner peace at all. Finally, they give up the struggle. Reliance on the grace of God alone makes us feel that our minds are sinful, and nothing can be done by us. We end up believing whatever the church or temple dictates to us through the priests, thinking that God's grace is coming to us through their words, and that this will do the rest of the work. We ultimately find that both self-effort and divine grace are necessary to guide the ship of our life across the ocean of struggles.

Sri Ramakrishna divided human beings into four classes. First, baddha, the bound souls. They are entangled in the world and apparently satisfied with the worldly life. They do not think of God or spiritual values.

The means for the attainment of the
other world does not become revealed
to the non-discriminating man who
blunders, being befooled by the lure

of wealth. One that constantly thinks that there is only this world, and none hereafter, comes under my sway again and again.¹

Through repeated suffering of many births the veil of ignorance becomes thin, and the potential divinity within allows a glimpse of the inner light. One then enters the second class, that of the spiritual seeker, mumukshu. His mind gradually turns inwards from the outer world. Such a person begins to question the material values and probes deep into the facts of experiences such as birth, death, old age, and disease.

Dispassion towards the objects of the senses, and also absence of egoism; perception of evil in birth, death, old age, sickness and pain.²

He then asks the questions: “Who am I?”, “What values am I pursuing?”, “What is my ultimate destiny?”, and begins with self-effort consisting of study of the scriptures, receiving help from the teacher, and under his guidance and inspiration makes an effort and ultimately attains freedom. Then he is called mukta, freed while living. This is the third class. There is a fourth class of those born perfect as a result of effort and grace in previous lives. They do not seem to need any self-effort. Their spiritual disciplines are meant to set an example for others.

We belong to the class of mumukshu or spiritual aspirants. Otherwise we would not be interested in religion, prayer, meditation or higher life. We must make efforts to practise discipline. This is the spiritual path discussed by all teachers of religion. We find this path mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount, the teachings of the prophets of the old Testament, the Koran, the Dhammapada, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, etc. Christ says that mere invocation of the Lord's name will not give salvation. A genuine spiritual aspirant must practise what is taught to him. He compares a true spiritual aspirant to the “house built on a rock.”

Therefore, whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock. And the rains descended and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man which built his house upon the sand. And the rains descended and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house and it fell; and

great was the fall of it.³

The prophets and saints have emphasized the practice of spiritual disciplines, in the absence of which no spiritual experience is possible. They themselves practised these disciplines and showed it through their lives. Religion is not a mere belief in dogmas and creeds. It is more than the study of scriptures and observance of moral laws, mechanical prayer or rituals. The goal of religion is the discovery of man's potential divinity and the application of this knowledge to daily actions. Rituals, prayers, creeds, and scriptural studies are mere helps; by themselves they cannot prove that the world and its experience is unsubstantial and God alone is real. Spiritual discipline and experience alone bring us faith, conviction and light, and solve our problems.

When that Self, which is both high and low,
is realized, the knot of the heart gets
untied, all doubts become solved, and all
one's actions are terminated.⁴

We shall now discuss some of the important spiritual disciplines emphasized by Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother, who are the greatest teachers of our age. They put their stress on the goal of life. According to them, the seeker must remember that the aim of life is to realize God and remain attuned to Him at all times. One should work with one's hands but keep the mind on God. One should overcome the selfish and worldly desires that are created by ignorance and manifest the divine nature which is the goal. This divine experience should be applied to daily duties. Then only can we enjoy peace and freedom in the world. We must remember that God is our own and that there is an eternal relationship between God and us. The question crops up here: "If God is our own, why should we make an effort to realize Him?" The preparation to have this firm faith that God is our own, itself involves effort. It comes out of our effort. The real faith is based upon spiritual experience. God is real in proportion to the intimacy of one's feeling for Him. He who is really eager to cross the ocean of life will ultimately break the bondage of birth and death. No one will be able to stop him. Like a man who knows that the adjacent room contains a heap of gold, he will try his level best, with all the means at his command, to enter the room and possess the gold. Sincerity and earnestness are essential. If we are half-hearted or lukewarm in our efforts we will not be able to reach the goal.

Now, three important disciplines to be practiced regularly, according to Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother, are meditation, study, and the performance of one's duties, surrendering the results at the feet of God.

Doubtless, O mighty-armed, the mind
is restless and hard to control; but
by practice and non-attachment, O
son of Kunti, it can be controlled.⁵

In such practise we should not lose heart or yield to despondency, the worst enemy of spiritual life. The ebb tide is bound to be followed by the flow tide. Eddies and whirlpools are part and parcel of the river, but after passing through them, we can reach the other shore where we will not be affected by eddies and whirlpools. Sraddha, faith, is the solid foundation on which the whole spiritual quest has to be based. Purity is another very important factor for which one has to work. One has to keep

one's body and mind undefiled. It is a practice common to all spiritual aspirants. The two central requirements for purity are the discrimination between the real and the unreal and the giving up of the unreal. Humility is another important factor needed to acquire the grace of God. Humility should not be mistaken for politeness or courtesy. They are artificial devices to eliminate unpleasant situations. A spineless man is good for nothing.

This Self is not attained by one devoid
of strength nor through carelessness, nor
through austerity without an aim.
But the Self of that knower,
who strives through these means, enters
into the abode that is Brahman.⁶

True humility is based upon spiritual perception. Through spiritual discipline one sees that God dwells in all, in the persecuted, in the oppressed, in the lowly, in the poor. This realization makes one truly humble. One respects all, undisturbed by their scholarship or social status or economic position.

Solitude is still another factor recommended for spiritual seekers. The mind with which we work towards our spiritual goal requires strength and depth. Restlessness and fickleness can be easily overcome with the help of solitude. Then only is it possible for us to live in society and face problems with calmness and ease. Solitude can be practised every day in one's own house or room. One has to be very particular about intimacy with worldly and selfish people. Their intimacy will stimulate worldly instincts. We have to promote and cultivate holy company to stimulate spiritual aspiration. In the company of the holy, noble, and truthful, one feels inner peace. They are not absent from the world, but they have to be found out. God has never left the world. Most of us have no capacity to recognize the holy. "And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not."⁷ We have to avoid so-called healers and miracle-mongers. They may have started with sincerity, but they have wandered away from the truth. They make the holy principles cheap and enter into business. Christ warns us against this cheap tendency in spiritual aspirants. "... My house is a house of prayer, but ye have made it into a den of thieves."⁸

Among the three disciplines practised by Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother, meditation and its predecessor, japam, are common to all Hindu mystics. Beginners practise these two together at first. Finally japam ends in meditation and meditation in experience. The same is true about the symbol to be meditated upon. It can be the personal God or the universal intelligence. It is difficult for the beginner to meditate on the impersonal spirit, so the Hindu saints have prescribed the personal God or God-man as the fittest symbol for meditation. They are concrete manifestations of Brahman, the absolute truth. If we meditate on the personal aspect of God with love and single-mindedness, we will develop the capacity through deepening our inner life to see the impersonal truth in that very personal aspect.

We should not allow ourselves to be troubled by a few disturbances or inequities within and around us; they come and go and finally disappear. If we make a persistent and steady effort, all the inequities and individual and social problems will be ironed out and a proper attitude will be created. We will begin to understand them in their proper perspective, so that in the long run they will not be problems at all. Christ's saying in this connection is very important. He said, "The poor ye

have always with you; but me ye have not always.”⁹ The problem of poverty appears to the mind of the devotee who has an ego and wants to do something to satisfy it. When the ego is illumined, then the problem also changes; it does not disturb the mind then. Dedicated devotees work for the sake of the Lord. Spiritual thoughts will awaken by constantly thinking of God. Without inner purity one cannot easily meditate. Japa or repetition of the name or word of God purifies the mind and creates inner calmness and leads us to a meditative temperament. God's name is considered to be very powerful in gathering the scattered mind, thus leading us from a lesser strength to a higher strength. Though in the beginning japam may sound dry, God's presence has to be felt hidden inside, in His name. As the wind blows away the clouds, God's name blows away the cloud of worldliness. Then only will the mind be steadfast. The natural tendency of the mind is to be drawn to the world. Japam directs it inward. The Holy Mother, Sarada Devi, performed japam every day for one hundred thousand times to set an example to the devotees.

Thus we discover that self-effort, which is so important, leads to self-surrender. No spiritual experience is possible without complete self-effacement. Ego separates man from God. A thread cannot be passed through the eye of a needle as long as the tiniest fiber sticks out. Ego is involved in all conscious actions as well as in spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and austerities. At the end of prayer and meditation and spiritual practices, one realizes that God is still far away. Then we surrender ourselves to God and seek His mercy. After self-effort we realize that God cannot be realized through self-effort alone. Self-surrender to the universal soul or God is essential. Then follows the divine grace through this self-surrender.

Out of pure compassion for them,
dwelling in their hearts, I destroy
the ignorance-born darkness, by the
luminous lamp of wisdom.¹⁰

To them, ever devout, worshipping Me
with love, I give the yoga of
discrimination by which they come to Me.¹¹

To those men who worship Me alone,
thinking of no other, who are ever
devout, I provide gain and security.¹²

Grace is the descent of God. It is a mystery to the finite mind. The finite mind asks questions: “What is it?”, “Who obtains it?”, “He dwells in the heaven—how can we get it here?”, “Why does one obtain grace and others not?” Now these questions can be answered from two points of view. From the point of view of the dualist who believes in a personal God, such grace comes from the personal God. He dwells in a place called Heaven. He showers His grace upon devotees who believe in Him. We do not understand the law according to which He showers His grace with our finite mind. It is like a piece of candy given by a child. Sometimes he refuses this gift to one, sometimes happily he gives it to another. There may be a law behind it but we do not know. It may be that we have performed austerities and disciplines in previous lives and we are reaping the fruits in this life. On the contrary, according to the nondualist who believes in a universal intelligence over which Maya

puts a veil, a bit of that intelligence is identified with our mind and we call it ego and self-effort. Knowledge removes the veil and then one becomes a channel of total intelligence. The individual self disappears. This is the descent of God, or grace. We are made to overflow with divine grace. God or the universal intelligence is like a magnet—when we remove the dirt from our hearts, the magnet of God naturally attracts us. God can also be compared to a wind; when we mend the hole in the sail, our sailboat moves by the wind.

The Omnipresent does not take note of the merit or demerit of any. Knowledge is veiled by ignorance; mortals are thereby deluded.¹³

Make the effort and you will realize grace. If we wish to cross a river we must pray, sitting on its bank. We shall be taken across in the proper time. This question can arise. If everything happens at the proper time, where does God's grace come in? The answer is that one must sit with a fishing rod if one wants to catch fish.

For by exertion objects are affected, not by wishes. Truly the deer do not walk into the mouth of the sleeping lion.¹⁴

In spiritual progress God makes us work a bit, and then He does the rest. We must take the first step, then He comes ten steps. This point is beautifully brought out in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna through the parable of the cow who is tethered on a rope ten feet long. When she finishes eating the grass within her reach, the length of the rope is increased to twenty feet.¹⁵ There is obviously no conflict between self-effort and divine grace. Though we realize the fruit through the grace, self-effort yet adds something to it. There is a great joy in getting the result in the form of grace after putting in our own effort also. A mango tastes very delicious in season. Though we can eat mango out of season it is not as delicious. A person can enjoy inherited wealth, but that enjoyment is ten-fold if he earns it with his own effort. Thus we find in conclusion that there is one process apparently divided into two sections, one called self-effort and the other divine grace. When this divine grace is realized, we say that nothing is possible without the grace of the Lord. The effort made previously merges into the total realization called grace.

How to Control the Ego

All religions agree that the ego is the greatest enemy of spiritual life. It is the mother of sin and suffering. It is the cause of attachment, hatred, bondage and sorrow. It is the Adam of Christianity. It, therefore, must be controlled. The seed must die before a plentiful harvest can arise. Through the ego a man gets grabbed by the neck and drowned in the ocean of worldliness. Sri Ramakrishna said, “All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.”¹ When the “I” dies, then only do stress and strain disappear, for it is this “I” that creates all distress and confusion.

How is this ego created? Religion speaks of the divinity of the soul. According to Christ, man is made in the image of God. He is naturally perfect but tempted by Satan. He is tempted to eat the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Death and suffering follow, then comes atonement, and the prodigal son is reunited with God. In Vedanta, the spiritual aspirant discovers, “Aham Brahmasmi—I am Brahman.”² The snake is discovered to be a rope through discrimination. The individual soul is recognized as the Universal Soul. There is no division between the drop and the ocean. Where do I stop and you begin? The universal soul is real, and the cause of this separateness is Maya, Ignorance. By the two powers of Maya, transformational (Avarana) and projectional (Vikshipa), the world seems to be identified with matter. The Absolute appears as relative. The spirit becomes identified with the limiting adjuncts (Upadhis), such as the body, senses, and mind, and becomes the individual. The all-pervading consciousness becomes the I-consciousness.

On the level of the body, the human being states, “I am brown, I am white, tall, short, ugly, beautiful.” On the level of the senses, he proclaims, “I am blind, I am deaf.” On the level of the mind, he thinks, “I am happy, I am unhappy, I am righteous, sinful, hateful.” There are diverse manifestations of the ego: both gross, “I am rich, strong, powerful.”; and subtle, “I am scholarly, religious, superior to others.” In reality there is no unchanging body. The soul is reflected in matter like the sun in the waves. Although the souls appear to be many, the reflected soul or individual is not ultimately real.

This ego is present in all embodied beings, even stones and trees. It is unconscious in animals, partly conscious in human beings and fully conscious in superhuman beings. When this ordinary ego is transcended, one becomes almost a part of God. All actions of the human plane are influenced by ego; love, hate, life, death. The individual soul, after death, wanders up and down, subjected to birth, death, old age, disease, suffering. He then gradually becomes disillusioned and seeks for a guide, a teacher. He practises spiritual disciplines as instructed by the teacher or the scriptures and tries to overcome the effects of the ego. This is done by purifying himself and though externally his appearance remains the same, there is an inner change. His attitude of looking at the world has changed. He discovers his true nature by atonement. He discovers sin to be selfishness and gives up his false individuality. This is called Liberation. Christ said, “The kingdom of God is within you.”³ The Gita says that God is present in the lotus of the heart of every human being.

The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna, and by His Maya causes all beings to revolve as though mounted on a machine.⁴

Sri Ramakrishna says, “The heart of the devotee is the abode of God.”⁵ Why can't we use it? Because it is hidden and covered. All coverings have their roots in the ego. The treasure is guarded by a dragon, called “Maya”, with three hoods: Sattwa, Rajas, Tamas. The ego functions through them. Tamas is inertia and delusion, which darkens the pure soul and makes it attached to sensuality, attraction and repulsion. Rajas, on the other hand, leads to aggression, power and domination.

This today has been gained by me; this desire I shall fulfill; this is mine, and this wealth also shall be mine in future.⁶

Sattwa is attachment to happiness, beauty and contentment. No doubt, these are spiritual qualities and are a means towards control, but they're a means and not an end. Our goal is perfect freedom from the gunas (bondage). All gunas are like chains; there is no difference between an iron chain and a golden chain.

How do we get rid of the gunas of Maya? The only remedy is through unswerving love for God and discrimination between the real and unreal.

Verily this divine illusion of Mine, made up of the Gunas, is hard to surmount; but those who take refuge in Me alone, they cross over this illusion.⁷

The only means of overcoming this effect of ego is to discriminate between the ego and the non-ego. The effects of the ego are:

1. The ego is the source of friction and fear.

It is from a second entity that fear comes.⁸

But when we learn to see the one Reality in all beings all fear and worry leave us.

Transitory existence is overcome even here by them whose mind rests on equality. Brahman is flawless and the same in all; therefore they are established in Brahman.⁹

What delusion, what sorrow is there for the wise man who sees the unity of existence and perceives all beings as his own Self?¹⁰

2. All people are seen to shun the company of egotistic people. Flatterers gather around the wealthy for a selfish purpose but abuse them behind their backs. Wealth and scholarship, by themselves, are not evil; they are instruments in helping others. The ego makes them intolerable. For example, rice and vegetables in a pot can be handled easily, but when fire is added, it becomes too hot. You cannot touch even the pot, what to speak of the vegetables. Similarly, knowledge of science, when used for aggressive purposes, builds up an individual and national ego and becomes a positive evil. Political power must be used by a philosopher-king and not an ordinary being.

3. The ego works like a fish bone. Even delicious food can't be enjoyed if a bone gets caught in the throat. An egotistic person cannot enjoy material comforts or social position even though he may have them.

4. The ego is a barrier to divine grace. When a fiber sticks out from a thread, it cannot go through the eye of a needle. The purpose of spiritual discipline is to remove or purify the ego. Spiritual people work for progress in their spiritual life. Everything depends on the degree of purification. When the ego is transcended or purified, one feels the grace of God. Just as water cannot stand on a high mound, it is difficult for God's grace to remain with an egoistic person. The ego is like a stick that divides reality between God and the world. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."¹¹ That is, the meek but not the coward. Those who are endowed with self-control are divine. Anger visits the proud and haughty.

He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the
imagination of their hearts. He hath
put down the mighty from their seats
and exalted them of low degree. He
hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.¹²

6. Ego at the national level is the cause of international friction and war. Ego in nations always leads to antagonism. The secret of world peace is to respect the rights of all; freedom for all and peaceful co-existence for all. Leaders should not rule through their power alone but through their moral integrity. The more military strength is shown, the more insecurity will remain.

Can man work without ego? There are three kinds of work:

1. EGOCENTRIC

This is a selfish act and has no spiritual value. It brings worry until the hour of death. At this level a person is satisfied with eating, drinking, loving. The world is sinful because this selfishness is the prominent motivation behind action. Selfishness is sin.

The good who eat the remains of sacrifice are freed from all sins; but the sinful ones who cook food only for themselves, they verily eat sin.¹³

Such people are enemies of themselves and the world. One cannot be happy injuring others. Even at the farthest corner of the earth, the same humanity is there.

2. WORK FOR WORK'S SAKE.

This is a compulsion which brings no inner satisfaction. Such people work with a stoic attitude. Tension is not seen on the outside, but it is there on the inside. Such people work with clenched fist and set teeth. That is the cause of inner war and outer war.

3. WORK FOR GOD'S SAKE

Thou art the doer, we are the instruments. Surrender the work at the Holy Feet of the Lord.

Seek to perform your duty; but lay not claim to its fruits. Be you not the producer of the fruits of karma; neither shall you lean towards inaction. Perform action, O Dhananjaya, being fixed in yoga, renouncing attachments, and even minded in success and failure; equilibrium is verily yoga.¹⁴

Work is worship and should be dedicated. Every duty is sacred.

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away, whatever austerity you practise, O Kaunteya, do it as an offering to Me.¹⁵

With this attitude no one seeks for personal gain. With this attitude, one hears the command of God. All motivation comes from the feeling of the presence of God. Work done for the Lord's sake uplifts and elevates a person and society.

Dedicated souls are the real benefactors of society. Their work has enduring value. They never work for themselves, only for others. Christ, Sri Ramakrishna, and Sri Krishna are the most outstanding examples in our human history. Selfless workers are the unseen pillars of society. Their work is not published in the paper or advertised on the television or radio. They are the silent support of society's structure.

How do we control the ego? The two main disciplines for turning the wicked ego into a friendly

one are to either stretch the ego or to shrink the ego. The discipline involved in stretching the ego is to detach yourself from the body, mind, senses, and feel for the world. You should feel happy when others feel happy. The discipline is based on discrimination and right thinking. In order to shrink the ego you should feel that you are the child or the instrument of God. As soon as the ego raises its head, you should feel you are only the instrument. You must have bhakti or devotion. Swami Vivekananda was an example of the first method, and Nag Mahasaya was an example of the second.

Another method of eliminating the ego is exemplified by Buddha. Buddha never admitted to a permanent ego, only sensation. Happiness and unhappiness were only waves of consciousness, like a river always flowing, always changing. So is the world always changing. Flux and change constitute the world. There is no inner kernel to an onion. Get rid of all the coverings which constitute the layers of ego and what remains? Inside is only Nirvana, peace.

When we follow the path of knowledge, we try to strengthen our discrimination and analyze the “I”. It is not the body, nor the senses, nor the mind; it is He. He is Pure Spirit and that “I” is one's true nature and not the individual self. “Tat Tvam Asi—Thou Art That.”¹⁶ Repeat day and night, “Aham Brahmasmi—I am Brahman (Satchidananda—Existence, Knowledge, Bliss).”¹⁷ We should get rid of body consciousness, for it creates illusion, hunger, thirst and racial division. It separates man from man. See the unity of existence in every individual. That Self is running through all, like a thread passing through a garland. Through spiritual practice we should find the presence of God in all beings of the world.

Because he who sees the Lord, seated the
same everywhere, destroys not the self
by the self, therefore he reaches th
Supreme Goal.¹⁸

When we follow the path of devotion, we try to shrink the ego. This is the easier path. “Naham, Naham—Not I, Not I.” Consider yourself as a servant of God through self-surrender. God is endowed with infinite power and compassion. We should allow God to hold our hand, not we His from ego. Mighty works can be done with our hands by Him. Sri Ramakrishna spoke of two egos, green and ripe. The ego of a green character is devilish, a rascal with the attitude that, “I am the doer, I am the master, I am the worker, I am the teacher, I am the scholar.” Turn this ego into a ripe ego through spiritual practices and disciplines. Let the ego remain, but as a servant or child of God. It will not injure you or anyone else, like the sword which has been turned into gold by the philosopher's stone. The sword appears sharp, but its sharpness has been made blunt by the philosopher's stone. The ripe ego is like a line drawn on flowing water, the next moment it disappears. Use this ego in service to all. The prayer of a man with a ripe ego is, “Oh Lord, I do not want kingdom or heavenly pleasures nor even to escape from the world. May I be your instrument in the removal of afflictions of beings tormented in this world by misery.”

The Philosophy and Discipline of Seeing God Everywhere

Scriptures speak of God as the All-pervading Reality, present everywhere and in everything. Yet we come across two popular views of the world. One may be called religious and the other secular. According to most of the principal religions, this world is full of temptations for man, which ultimately lead to his downfall. This is said to be the contrivance of Satan or the Devil. The world is full of the activities of this Devil and, hence, a prisonhouse. Happiness, immortality, and such other things exist only in heaven, which a person may visit after death. To be fit for deliverance after death, a spiritual aspirant has to give up everything, for these two—the world and God—are poles apart. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar are opposed to each other. The cause of all misery is sin; men in the world are sinful, hence giving up the world is the only way to happiness. Such is the impression created by some teachings of the major religions.

The secular view emphasizes suffering and not sin. This scheme of thought does not admit God or Heaven. Naturally, it emphasizes worldly life and asserts that suffering can be avoided, or at least considerably reduced, by accepting social responsibilities and fulfilling them. This objective can be achieved by educational, technological, and scientific developments. Thus, the city of God is replaced by the city of man; mysticism by humanism; commingling with God through prayer by human fellowship. In religion the ideal of progress is to give up attachment to life, world, and human relationships. According to the secular view, however, we are taught that this sensate world in which we live is alone true. Supersensuous experience is only suicidal imagination. If you cannot enjoy happiness here, what is the guarantee of happiness hereafter? Enjoy what you have got here and now; no miracle will happen at the time of death to give you happiness! The argument, though appealing for the time being, does not satisfy a discerning mind.

Studies in the Vedanta under proper guidance and discipline resolve the conflict of these two views, one representing dogmatic religion and the other secularity. It also teaches the real meaning of renunciation. Distinct from the two previously expressed views, the view of Vedanta does not require the repression of love or emotion. At the same time, it recognizes the evil that is existing in this world. We can only destroy the evil by deifying the world—seeing the presence of God in everything. Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi would always say that we can overcome our enemy by seeing in him our friend! Ill will is widely spread in this modern world; yet all want peace. Thus, peace seems to be an illusion. Modern man is trying to find the war to end war. This search for peace through armament is ridiculous. Buddha taught the world that hatred has to be conquered not by hatred but by love. Before the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, left her body, she uttered these immortal words, “If you want peace, then do not look into anybody's faults. Look into your own faults. Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own.”¹How

instructive and helpful are these words in everyday, practical life!

The Upanishads give us a positive outlook in pursuing and shaping our daily life towards the goal of seeing God in everything. Deny evil and look to the world with the attitude that it is actually God. It is not a false optimism. This view has a sound philosophical foundation and is based on experience. It is applicable to all the people of the world because it preaches the Ultimate Reality, which is universal. The universe comes from Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss Absolute. But this Absolute Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss is different from the empirical world. Atman is the knowing Self in man. He is the Hearer of hearing, the Knower of knowing, and the Thinker of thought. Therefore, Brahman or Atman is knowledge Itself. This is the Bliss of identity. This Bliss is the source of attraction between husband and wife, friend and friend, God and man. It is Bliss because it is Infinite.

Sat, Chit, and Ananda, or Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss are not the attributes but the essence of Reality Itself. What is the nature of the universe? Wherever our eyes go, whatever our senses grasp, it is Brahman alone experienced through the sense organs. At this level, there is neither creation nor destruction, neither good nor evil, neither bondage nor liberation.

But how does Vedanta explain the nature of the world as the average man experiences it? Upanishadic teachers proclaim that the world is not a creation like a pot. It is simply the breathing of the Lord. It may be compared with the waves of the ocean, music given out by a musical instrument and hair and nails coming out of the body, or sparks of fire. If we say, "God creates." The question naturally arises, "Why should He create? Has He got some purpose unfulfilled?" The Vedantic answer to this question is that God has no motive to fulfil as He is fulfilment Himself. He is just playing like a child playing with his image in a mirror. Sport is His nature. He is the eternal Child and the universe is His playground; we are all His playmates. If we forget that it is a play and take it seriously, then all sufferings come.

Still, some are not satisfied by this answer. We demand explanations, theories about the processes of creation; because to most of us creation appears to be real. Vedanta gives the whole explanation in one word, "Maya." Brahman, or the Ultimate Reality, is the ground of all that exists through Maya on the causal, subtle, and gross planes. On any or all of these planes, Brahman cannot be dissociated from the world, as waves cannot be dissociated from the ocean, calm or agitated. Cause and effect are essentially non-different, like clay and the pot. The pot is a form made out of clay. Thus effects are apparent changes imposed on the underlying Reality which essentially remains unchanged. Looked at from a pragmatic point of view, Maya is a statement of our experience of the world. Maya functions through two powers, known as Avarana and Viksepa, which mean, respectively, covering and projecting. The reality of Brahman is first covered, and then the universe is projected. Though names and forms are taken to be real, they are fleeting; the abiding Reality that flashes through them is called Brahman in the Vedanta and ever remains absolutely unchanged. The sands of the desert ever remain unstained by the appearance of a mirage. Even so, what really exists is God or Brahman alone; if we see anything else, it is only the appearance of God through Maya. What the ignorant call the world is Brahman or God in reality. We should, therefore, with reason and understanding, see God all the time in everything and every being. We do not seek Him; we see Him. This is the metaphysical foundation of the universe.

What happens, then, one may ask, to human love and relationship? Shall not husband love his wife,

or mother her child? By all means, says the Vedanta! This love will become purer and all the more intense, because, in a changed perspective, the lover will see the presence of the Supreme Self in the beloved.

There are three elements in love—physical, intellectual, and spiritual. Spiritual love has no possessiveness, no jealousy, no bargaining. It is a real love with faith and freedom. In spiritual love, there is no exploitation, no selfishness, and no notion of “me and mine.” With this attitude, the finite view of life is renounced. Then only can we see the whole universe as Supreme Spirit, God, or Brahman. Every form, every being, then, is Brahman. This proper attitude towards life and universe results in bliss, because there is no desire to possess. Desirelessness is peace, non-attachment the highest joy.

This state is thought to be like that of a wall or a stone by some superficial thinkers. They cannot imagine perfection. The outward appearance of a man who sees God in all is, many a time, the same as that of an uncultured person. We cannot imagine the immensely wide scope of his work and the incentive behind it! He accepts everything; condemns nothing.

It is wrongly thought that the Vedanta condemns riches. What the Vedanta condemns is greed and possessiveness. Money and resources are a trust given to man by God. Man is expected to utilize them in that light. He is expected to share all that he has got with all those he meets in life.

The Upanishads do not teach giving up the world in a crude sense. They do not ask us to run away from society and sit idle. In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna wished to run away from duty. But Lord Krishna gave a path of yoga through which all activities are done with the consciousness of being an instrument in God's hands.

Can we enjoy the world as a witness? Our hands and mind will work, but our soul will remain a detached observer. With this attitude, we can enjoy the world the most. Who really enjoys a picture most? The seller, the buyer, or the witness? The seller is constantly brooding over his profit and loss. He is watching the visitors and looking at the bids. He has no time to relax. The buyer is anxious to pay the least for the highest gain. Both are tense. But the witness has no such botherations. This world is a magnificent picture. The Creator is the great Artist—the great Poet. The universe is His painting, His poem, full of the rhythm and beauty of Infinite Bliss!

If we can successfully give up greed and selfishness the world is a wonderful place in which to live. If we can see the presence of God in all without distinction, the picture of the world becomes beautiful indeed. Ruthlessness will vanish; love will be spontaneous; all will obtain assurance and fearlessness! Even if poverty remains, the poor will be served with love and reverence. Charity will have a new meaning. Everything will be shared with warmth and love without degrading the giver or the receiver.

But this goal of seeing God in everything is not just a sentimental slogan. It can be realized through hard discipline and negation of selfishness. This moment I say, “All is God,” and the next moment a man pushes me in the street, and I give him a blow sending him to the ground! It is only through constant vigilance and practice that the non-duality, divinity, and immortality of the soul is realized.

To begin with, we have to fill our minds with noble thoughts. Then all unbecoming, unwanted thoughts will leave, bringing truth, purity, love and goodness. This is indeed hard to achieve. But

once gained, our joy will know no bounds. Mouth speaks and hands work out of the fullness of the heart. We should never mind failures. For some time we may not have measurable success. Still, we must go ahead step by step, keeping intact the ideal and working our way with proper means. We will then discover that the means and the goal meet completely. When we see God in all, we live in a non-dual world, a world of beauty, love, strength, and unity. This is the summum-bonum of human life.

The Practice of the Presence of God

All religions have emphasized the fact that God, or the eternal spirit, is manifested throughout the universe and that spirit is the essence of everything. Sri Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, mentions that he is the universal principle going through every name and form, like a thread going through the pearls to form a necklace. The forms are only the outer masks. Spirit is the foundation of the universe and cannot be separated from it, like milk and its whiteness, flower and its fragrance.

All this should be covered by the Lord...¹

He who sees diversity and difference goes from death to death. Variety is only apparent. It is not real. It is only in the external world.

What, indeed, is here is there; what is there is here likewise.²

We should be able to see the presence of the Lord in the temple and the business place, the cloister and the laboratory, the monastery and the farmyard. God is the intelligence in the doer, the worker, the thinker and the devoted.

The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna, and by His Maya causes all beings to revolve as though mounted on a machine.³

God is the indwelling spirit in all and inspires all to work for their evolution. Man is only the instrument. "Me and mine" is ignorance. It is the ego that generates pride, jealousy, and greed in the human mind. Salvation is through atonement. My will and Thy will should be one. One should perform his duties, accepting and facing waves of happiness and misery with equanimity.

Treating alike pain and pleasure, gain and loss, victory and defeat, engage yourself in the battle. Thus you will incur no sin.⁴

Perform action, O Dhananjaya, being fixed in yoga, renouncing attachments, and even-minded in success and failure, equilibrium

is verily yoga.⁵

All actions should be theocentric, not egocentric. The fruit of action is not in the outside world. Whatever comes from the outside is transitory. Through purification we slowly come to know that all motivation and drive come from Him. Thus we get rid of pride and selfishness. The true fruit of work is detachment. The meaning of evolution is more and more manifestation of the divinity that is already within us. Through ignorance the divine soul identifies itself with the physical objects and wants to be happy through physical actions. Every work disillusiones the soul. The aim of action is detachment, then freedom. Real enjoyment comes through renunciation, when one realizes that he or she is the instrument in the hands of God. "...Protect yourself through that detachment."⁶

All actions should be based on justice, love, peace. If all rulers, generals, businessmen, teachers, artists work in that way, the world will be a heaven. In order to enable us to do work with that spirit, we should be able to see the presence of God in everyone, both good and evil, as in the case of Sri Ramakrishna's story about the monk who was beaten by a landlord. When his disciples gave him milk and nursed him back to consciousness he said, "Brother, he who beat me is now giving me milk."⁷

We should not covet, but give up greed and other propensities. Our selfish mind will ascend to higher things based on steady unselfishness, and we will get the experience that we are identified with God, ego being completely effaced. "Tat Tvam Asi—Thou Art That" is the basis of all morality. We must not seek to secure our individual welfare. Then only shall we be able to live any number of years and enjoy peace of mind here and hereafter. A spiritual man is never afraid of death. The poet, Kabir, said, "When you are ushered into the world you cry and others rejoice; live your life in such a way that when you die you will laugh and others will weep." Religion is not a belief or a set of dogmas which we can put on and off as we please. It is Dharma, the law of inner growth. Sri Ramakrishna would say, "Tie the non-dual knowledge (Advaita-jnana) in the hem of your cloth and then do whatever you like."⁸

Even while performing unpleasant duties, we should never forget the ideal of non-duality, divinity and immortality. We may have to pursue and bring to justice the wicked and the evil doer in society, but it should be done as an instrument in the hands of God.

By Me have they been verily slain already. You be
merely an instrument, O Saryasachin.⁹

Though it appears to be coming from hard-heartedness, the surgeon must cut the patient, the mother must spank the child, and the judge must condemn the criminal without any attachment or hatred. Hinduism does not advocate pacifism for all, nor "don't resist evil" for all. There is a different dharma or duty at different stages of man's evolution. If you see evil you must resist, but there is no evil in spirit.

When to the man of realisation all beings
become the very Self, then what delusion
and what sorrow can there be for that seer of
oneness?¹⁰

He verily sees, who sees that all actions
are done by Prakriti alone and that the
Atman is actionless.¹¹

The highest man does not see evil, and, therefore, there is no question of resisting it because his mind has gone above all awareness of duality. The ideal is to go beyond all difference.

You transcend the three Gunas, O Arjuna.
Be free from the pairs of opposites,
ever-balanced, unconcerned with getting and
keeping and centered in the Self.¹²

As long as a man thinks and reasons, he should keep in his pocket the knowledge of non-duality and the immortality of the soul. Glorification of the body is glorification of the corpse. We should glorify the soul; that is the immortal entity. We can do it through love and unselfishness.

In order to attain that state of awareness, one has to practise in solitude and cultivate the equanimity of the mind. If the mind is properly trained, integrated and purified, then most of the battle is won.

The Manas (mind) therefore is the cause
Of bondage and liberation to us:
Of bondage, when attached to object,
Of liberation, when free from it.¹³

In solitude, we get the opportunity to pray and meditate. At that time we keep the mind away from its involvement with the world and selfishness. God alone is the object of thought in prayer. We get the desire to go to a temple or a church and spend our time in good and holy company. The accomplishment of the work depends upon our mind. Our prayers should not be mechanical. We should establish a definite relationship with God. One should not talk of sin and cogitate on the wrong doings done in the past. By repeating we are sinners we become sinners. Sin is after all a condition of the mind. We should not emphasize God's glories. We do this because we ourselves want glorification or riches. This calculating tendency should be given up. We should look to the pure essence of God, which is love, knowledge, strength and purity. Prayers, when they are done with intense sincerity, become meditation. Through meditation we open the secret chamber of our soul. The divinity is within, not outside. We have to knock and it shall be opened. Prayer is always followed by the attainment of power and wisdom. It is irresistible. It automatically comes provided we make the effort with proper intensity. Generally, the question is asked whether our prayers are answered. The answer is "yes." If our prayers are sincere, if they are done with the utmost harmony between our mind and speech, they are answered. There should be harmony in what we think and what we speak. When our knowing, willing and feeling are spiritualized, our total life will be spiritualized, and we will have knowledge of God. It cannot be compared with book learning. It is an infinite inner awareness. Books do help us in the beginning, but when we begin getting inner experience we do not need any book. Our whole life becomes a book. Book-learned people are like vultures: they soar high in the sky but their eye is on the rotten piece of flesh on the ground. Our scholarship should be used with discrimination and dispassion. Too much study does harm in making

us over-ambitious for name and fame and gains.

The man of faith, the devoted, the master of his senses obtains knowledge. Having obtained knowledge he goes promptly to the Peace Supreme.¹⁴

We don't get conviction from mere learning or reasoning, but we get conviction from our spiritual experience.

Real love of God should not be confused with sentimentalism. True love is based upon knowledge and experience of God. There is no place for fear nor expectation of result. It is love for its own sake, like the attraction of the magnet and the needle.

In trying to understand the nature of God, we imagine Him as a person. He is neither a person, nor an absolute thought. Scriptures describe Him as that “which can be neither thrown away nor taken up, which is beyond the reach of mind and speech, immeasurable, without beginning and end, the whole, one's very Self, and of surpassing glory.”¹⁵

One is not subjected to fear at any time if one knows the Bliss that is Brahman, failing to reach which, words, along with the mind, turn back.¹⁶

Those devotees who have a pure heart, they know Him as all-pervading spirit and consciousness, though there is always a difference in the degree of manifestation. The highest manifestation of God is the incarnation, such as Krishna, Rama, Christ, Ramakrishna. There is not just one incarnation. There are a series of them. He comes again and again with different names and forms.

Whenever, O descendant of Bharata, righteousness declines and unrighteousness prevails, I manifest Myself.¹⁷

Images are also symbols of God. The whole world is the reading of the Absolute. The Personal God is the highest reading.

In whatever way men identify with Me, in the same way do I carry out their desires; men pursue My path, O Partha, in all ways.¹⁸

There is always a danger of dogmatism. The devotee is likely to think that whatever he has realized is the only truth. Therefore, tolerance and acceptance must be practised in order to realize real harmony. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, “There are innumerable opinions and innumerable paths leading to God.”¹⁹ We just have unswerving devotion to our ideal and at the same time have the conviction that God is universal spirit. He is present in all forms, all names. Attachment to God-

consciousness requires detachment from the outer forms of the world. The world is a mixture of truth and falsehood, like milk and water, sand and sugar. We have to separate them like the swan and the ant to clearly distinguish between these mixtures of good and bad. When we are practising spiritual disciplines such as self-control, it creates a void in our daily life. We have to fill it up with God-consciousness, thinking about His presence always with us, inside us, outside us, as the eternal guide, as our mother, our father. The life that we lead is not the aim of evolution. There is no perfection in matter. We have to deal with the world, but all our consciousness should be with God. He is the firm pole-star of our life. We have to perform our duties while in the world, but all attention should be on Him. In the world we should live like the maidservant who does her work but knows that her real home is somewhere else. The world, by itself, is neither wicked nor bad. If we understand the world in its proper perspective, this world serves as a gymnasium and gives us more and more strength. The whole creation has sprung from bliss. It remains in bliss and it goes back to bliss. The human being is really God, only He is covered with ignorance. We should touch the philosopher's stone and become gold. Then alone we shall not be stained, no matter where or in what circumstances we live.

How to Cultivate Love of God

The two main streams of India's spiritual experience are Jnana (knowledge) and Bhakti (love of God). They are approached by the intellect and by the heart. Both are necessary for attaining the spiritual goal. To balance the flight of the spiritual bird, both wings are necessary, as well as the tail, meditation. These two streams are represented by the Ganges and Jamuna rivers. Both rivers have mysterious healing powers, as attested by the Western scientists. It is said that cholera germs die within 3–4 hours after giving the patient a bottle of Ganges water. The rivers are not only physically healing but also spiritually stimulating. Most of India's trends of spirituality have developed on the banks of these two rivers. Their banks have been dotted by holy men throughout thousands of years. They have been the abode of the Rishis of the Upanishads. Countless devotees have meditated there and spent their lives in study and spiritual retirement. Many of them take daily oblations and will not take food without a few drops of the sacred water. Hundreds have had the ambition to lay down their bodies on these banks. The ashes of the great political leaders, Gandhi and Nehru, are consecrated on the banks of these rivers. The holy cities of Hardwar, Vrindavan, Ayodhya, Mathura, Patna, and Prayag are on the sacred banks of these two rivers. The most sacred town of Prayag is situated at the confluence of these two rivers. Both of them, after meeting together in Prayag and flowing miles together, disappear in the infinite ocean.

The water of the Jamuna appears as black as Sri Krishna, the great teacher of Bhakti. He is the ideal personal God with name and form and attributes. However, if one takes in hand the water of the Jamuna, there is no colour. Similarly, the personal God merges into the formless and nameless. Sri Krishna teaches about God both with form and without form. As the Ganges and Jamuna waters kill the germs of the disease, so knowledge and love remove the impurities of the head and heart.

Verily there is no purifier in this world like knowledge. He that is perfected in yoga realizes it in his own heart in due time.¹

Even if a man of the most sinful conduct worships Me with undeviating devotion, he must be reckoned as righteous, for he has rightly resolved.²

We shall now discuss the nature of the divine and how to cultivate love for it. First, the path of Bhakti or love of God is easier and more practical than that of Jnana or knowledge for the average seeker. The path of knowledge speaks of an ideal which is impersonal, without name or form or attributes. The discipline recommended to realize the ideal is Viveka (discrimination) and Vairagya

(dispassion). By suppressing all attachment, feelings and desires, the individual is effaced. Bhakti, on the other hand, is centered on the personal God with a concrete name and form. The devotee has to center his attention and give total love to any particular personal form.

That, verily, is of the nature of supreme
love of God.³

We can love him, pray to him, open our hearts to him. Our emotions and feelings are not destroyed or suppressed but are properly channelled to God. Even the various passions can be utilized so that they become part of an intense desire and yearning for God. They are transformed into intense love for the highest ideal. In the case of St. Ignatius Loyola, anger was converted into intense love of God. Greed and ego, which appear as obstacles in the path of spiritual life, can also be utilized to create intense feeling for God. The outcome is that the devotee feels he is the servant and child of God. Although the individuality is retained, it is transformed like the sword which is turned into gold by the philosopher's stone. The ultimate result is full freedom and realization.

Let us now try to define what love is. According to scripture, love is an intense attraction which holds together two objects. This holding principle pervades all levels of creation: physical, mental and spiritual. The attraction of one atom for another is a part of that same force which expresses itself on the emotional plane as love between two people; mother and child, friend and friend, husband and wife. In the case of families, it forms a binding tie which creates and stabilizes society. On the spiritual plane, this very love works on the highest level and manifests itself as a tremendous attraction between the living being and God.

The proof of its existence is direct perception. At a certain level of evolution worldly attractions drop away, and an irresistible attraction between the individual and the supreme soul manifests, just like the attraction of a magnet for iron filings. It is for this reason that no prophet has tried to prove God's existence through reason. Thoughts create doubt. But if the mind is stilled, this perennial current of love is felt automatically. "Be still and know that I am God."⁴

This love is described by the saints and seers as "paranurakti", supreme love transcending all inferior love. This is the characteristic of this love. It transcends the attachment of the body and the world. The love of motherland wife is that divine love coming through human channels. That very love is called romantic when it is on the psychophysical plane alone, as in the case of Romeo and Juliet. It is directed to one person; the husband loves the wife and the wife loves the husband. The world idolizes this love, but its goal is pleasure alone and not spiritual realization. It is purely personal and loses its intensity with the passing of time.

The lesson we can learn from life is to love God alone. The average man loves most things through his sense organs. But sense enjoyments can't be the highest goal of life. In that case, we could not rise above the animal level. The animals have keener senses than man. The dog's sense of smell, the vulture's sight and the appetite of the pig all exceed man's capacities.

Many so-called devotees love God for the enjoyment of heaven. The enjoyments of heaven are also material enjoyments. They are in a subtle form, but they are all material. At best, all sense enjoyments come to an end.

O Death, ephemeral are these, and they
waste away the vigour of all the senses
that a man has. All life, without exception,
is short indeed. Let the vehicles be yours
alone; let the dances and songs be yours.⁵

They are finite and cannot satisfy the yearning of the infinite soul. Eternal satisfaction is not possible through food, clothes, music, poetry, or long life in the heavens. Yet, these things are not useless. We do get experience and understanding of the nature of the physical universe. Thus, we attain detachment, which leads us to freedom. Then, we become eager to search for God.

Eternal peace is for those—and not for
others—who are discriminating and who
realise in their hearts Him who—being
the eternal among the ephemeral, the
consciousness among the conscious—alone
dispenses the desired objects to many.⁶

He is that which is the essence of all things. We must first realize him in our heart through experience, then we see him in everything. We then become “Rejoicers in the welfare of all beings.”⁷ Then, serving comes.

This wonderful principle of eternal love has two stages: preparatory and supreme. The preparatory stage is for beginners. Understanding man's need of concrete symbols, all religions accept the use of rituals, lights, flowers, hymns, and music. The image is a concretized form of an abstract principle. The cross, the crescent, the star of David, the book; a variety of beautiful images is used in temples and churches. Image worship and idolatry are completely different things, but they are often misunderstood by well-meaning people, who, without understanding the underlying principle, try to destroy another man's worship, not knowing that he is worshipping the same God. This is the result of a superficial understanding of religion. In the end, symbols and images are transcended, after having served their purpose. They are like earthly things paving the way to higher and higher experience. Like gifts, Christmas cards and letters, they drop away as the higher awareness arises. They are not forcefully given up but lose their meaning and taste as the devotee advances. Eventually, the world and the body are forgotten, and the devotee remains absorbed in the inner essence of God.

How do we cultivate this divine love? The Hindu mystics prescribe certain disciplines which have been developed from the experience of teachers for hundreds and hundreds of centuries. The teacher not only instructs, but also quickens the spiritual growth of the student. A candle can be lighted from another candle, and the teacher serves as a candle providing light for himself and others.

Like the book in the brook and the sermon in a stone, a new world opens up for the student whose spiritual consciousness has been awakened by a living teacher.

And this our life, exempt from public
haunt, Finds tongues in trees, books

in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything.⁸

Poetry is sentimental, but in the case of those whose spiritual consciousness has been awakened by a living teacher, they do see a book in a brook and a sermon in a stone. The teacher teaches by word, experience, and silent influence. A Christ, a Buddha, and a Ramakrishna; they are all accepted as teachers and prove the validity of spiritual life.

Another help is the mantra; a sacred word (name of God), which must be received from the teacher. Through repetition and contemplation on the meaning of the mantra, it becomes a self-active property. It works on the deep-rooted worldly impressions and creates a mood for meditation.

Sri Ramakrishna, in our age, had various visions of Kali (the Divine Mother) and described Her as an ocean of blissful energy and chose Her as an ideal for highest realization. This is a distinctive feature of Hinduism.

The truth is one. Sages call it by various names.⁹

Prophets and Incarnations are manifestations of the same reality, which is impersonal, abiding, all-pervasive and immortal. Improper understanding of this all-inclusive principle creates two dangers: shallow liberalism and intense fanaticism. This can be easily avoided by the doctrine of the Ishta or Chosen Ideal. One has full liberty to choose one's own ideal as a manifestation of the supreme reality and worship it with intense love and, at the same time, show respect and reverence for all. Thus, we combine the broadness and the intensity of an underlying universal principle by accepting different levels of spiritual consciousness and depth. A real lover of God is like a pearl oyster; he dives deep into the ocean and with attunement and solitude finally sees his own ideal in all other ideals.

Certain disciplines are necessary for the attainment of true love of God:

1. CONTROL OF THE BODY AND MIND. This discipline forms the foundation of the spiritual life. Under this are included various other aspects, necessary for the building of a spiritual life. One aspect is food. Food can build up three layers of the personality; gross, subtle and finer. Food not only builds up muscles, bones and blood, but it also builds the subtle nerves and influences the thought. So, one should be careful in choosing the food and insure that it is taken with a proper attitude.

When nourishment is pure, reflection and higher understanding become pure.¹⁰

The Bhagavad Gita advises the middle path, where you avoid the two extremes.

2. CONTROL OF PASSIONS AND VIOLENT DESIRES. This important factor can be developed through discrimination and will-power. It is not suppression but sublimation, transcending lower forms to reach higher forms. The worldly passions are directed towards God. The ego becomes the servant of God. Both external and internal purification are necessary. External cleanliness, self-control, truthfulness, compassion, unselfishness, and noninjury are all part of the inner preparation. Both types of purity are necessary;

the external leads to the internal, and ultimately the highest goal is reached.

3. CONTROL OF DEPRESSION. If the body and the mind are not strong and well-developed through disciplines, the devotee is hindered by obstacles. The statement is true: “A sound mind in a sound body.”

This Self cannot be known through much study, nor through the intellect, nor through much hearing. It can be known through the Self alone that the aspirant prays to; this Self of that seeker reveals Its true nature.¹¹

4. ABSENCE OF EXCESSIVE MIRTH. An uncontrolled life is a waste of energy and the shallow mind tends to become more shallow and without a purpose in life. Inevitably, this is followed by depression and disease.

The preparatory disciplines are by no means insignificant, for they lead the aspirant to higher love. Although the devotee is not yet established in the higher love, certain clear symptoms of the approach of this love may begin to appear. The first symptom is that one feels a great desire to listen to the scriptures and contemplate them, seeking the company of the holy. The example of the Chataka bird is an appropriate illustration of this mood. It is said that this bird will drink only rain water and waits for that water alone. It will not be satisfied with earthly water.

The second symptom is intense misery when separated from the thought of God, like a lover separated from the beloved. There also comes an impatience in the presence of the worldly-minded. Too much intimacy with the world and worldly-minded people depletes your spiritual strength. We get involved in worldly talks and worldly aspiration and this creates a distraction both during the day and at the time of meditation.

Know that Self alone that is one without a second, on which are strung heaven, the earth and the inter-space, the mind and the vital forces together with all the other organs, and give up all other talks.¹²

Gradually, life appears in a new light, and we see the world through new glasses. Harshness, rudeness, anger, and jealousy slowly disappear. The world of business, selfishness and practicality appears beautiful because one sees God in it. All the mystics have a happy look. Holy Mother never saw Sri Ramakrishna without a smile and called his room a “mart of joy.”

The next symptom is complete identification with God's will. At this stage, we can truthfully say, “Thy will be done.” Even men suffering from illness or facing death will say this. Then, the devotee sings the prayer to God, saying “I am the machine, and Thou, O Lord, art the Operator. I am the house and Thou art the Indweller. I am the chariot and Thou art the Driver. I move as Thou movest me; I speak as Thou makest me speak.”¹³

There are three characteristics by which we can judge genuine love for God:

1. THERE IS NO BARGAINING. A genuine devotee does not worship for health, wealth or heavenly happiness. His desires are left behind and He loves God because He is beauty, goodness, and truth.
2. THERE IS NO FEAR. A true devotee knows no fear of punishment, suffering or death. Love and fear cannot coexist.
3. THERE IS NO WORLDLY ATTACHMENT . A genuine devotee does not care for heaven or pleasures in this life. God is the fulfilment of all desires and aspirations. He alone exists and in Him beauty and wisdom find culmination. This love of God is, itself, Mukti or Liberation from the ego and worldly attachments.

The only prayer of the real devotee is: “O Lord, let me be born again and again and suffer afflictions if I can love Thee alone.” He becomes mad with love and is in communion with God, and this makes him rise above the pleasure and pain of the world. In his presence, all rudeness and harshness disappear, and he demonstrates the secret of peace. Ordinary men live in a loveless world. The human being separates himself from the real world and God. When this real love is discovered, he then lives in a magic world called Love. The love of God is then expressed through the love of man. This is the ultimate in all religions and the ultimate in all spiritual experience.

Conceptions of God

Scriptures describe the nature of God as unthinkable and indescribable. Still, a devotee asks for the proof of the existence of God in terms of direct evidence or “pratyaksha pramana,” like seeing the wall with one's own eyes. All mystical experience is based on this direct evidence. Christ uses the term “Behold!” Swami Vivekananda questioned Sri Ramakrishna with these words, “Have you seen God?” This is called in religion “aparokshanubhuti”— direct and immediate perception. How do the mystics see God? They go through spiritual discipline. There are some common characteristics of this discipline though the details may vary according to the emphasis given by the teacher. Such common characteristics as purity of mind, contemplation in solitude, control of the senses, discrimination between the eternal and non-eternal, and deep yearning for God are to be found in all the teachings. The seeker of pearls in the ocean has to dive deep.

To know the nature of God it is necessary to contemplate. Contemplation demands that one has to give up thinking of objects or ideas having opposite characteristics (vijatiya) and think of objects and ideas having common characteristics (sajatiya), and then continue thinking of these common characteristics like the unbroken flow of oil from one vessel to another. The Mundaka upanishad describes this process as shooting the target with the arrow. This involves complete concentration on the tip of the arrow and the target.

Taking hold of the bow, that is the great
weapon of the Upanishads, one
should fix on it an arrow, sharpened with
meditation. Drawing the string with a mind
absorbed in Its thought, hit, O good-looking one,
that very target that is the Immutable.

Om is the bow; the soul is the arrow; and
Brahman is called its target. It is to
be hit by an unerring man. One should
become one with It just like an arrow.¹

There is considerable confusion and difference of opinion as to the nature of God. This is quite natural because most of the descriptions come from imagination and not experience. Those who have seen God have no quarrel with any definition. Mystic descriptions are only indications and helps to know God. When somebody asks about the moon on the second day after the new moon day, we do not point directly to the moon because it is very difficult to see. Instead, we show the branch of a tree, thus focusing the attention in that area, and then step by step, take the attention of the seer to the moon (shakha chandra nyaya). Similarly, it is impossible to categorize God as either personal or

impersonal or with form or without form, or extracosmic or intercosmic. The Vedas speak of God as one without a second; Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, and Bliss Absolute, seen by individuals in a variety of names and forms, gross and subtle. This view is synthetic and non-contradictory.

The idea of God evolves in proportion to the evolution of the mind of the inquirer. God never changes. Our idea of God evolves until it reaches the highest experience. It is like looking at a meadow through a hole in the wall. The hole is like the mind. If we enlarge the hole we shall see the extended meadow without any limitation. Similarly, if we purify our mind we shall have a very close view of God. If we look to the ocean from a distance the water appears to be blue. But if we go to that water we find no colour. Descriptions of God are like pearls of different hue and lustre. We select an ideal according to our taste and liking. No view of God is wrong, for we go not from error to truth but from lower truth to higher truth; from one view to another view; from a narrow view to a magnificent and unlimited view. If we have sincerity of purpose, loyalty to the ideal and earnestness in endeavour, we can certainly reach the highest goal.

Scriptures describe God as the sole reality of this universe. What we call the universe is none other than God. Why do we see matter and duality? Because we are not using the right instrument. If we look at water with our naked eyes we will have one view. But if we use a microscope to view the same water, we will clearly see tiny objects, which we would not have imagined when we looked at that water with our naked eyes. Similarly, God seen through the senses is termed as matter; seen through the mind is called idea; and seen through intuition is called spirit. Likewise, the world seen by a wicked mind is termed as hell, seen by a virtuous mind is called heaven, and seen by a spiritual mind is called God. Human beings have different attitudes toward God. This is aptly illustrated through the conversation between Sri Rama and his intimate disciple and devotee Hanuman. On being asked one day by Rama as to how Hanuman looked on him, the latter replied, "Oh Lord, when I am conscious of my body, I consider you as the master and I am thy servant. But Lord, when I am conscious of being an individual self I consider thee as the whole and I am a part thereof. However, when on special occasions I transcend my body and individual consciousness I consider myself identical with thee."²

Some conceive of God as unknown and unknowable. The world is nothing else but the objectification of God. He is the eternal seer, the eternal subject. When the mind is purified and is lifted to higher and higher planes of consciousness, the subject and object merge into one. When we stand before a mirror we see our reflection as a separate individual in the mirror. But when the mirror is removed that separate individual disappears and becomes one with ourself.

Some conceive of God as the cosmic intelligence and light everywhere in this universe. He is the light in the moon, in the sun, and in the stars. Through his reflected intellect human beings think, pray, and meditate. Through his energy everything in this universe moves and exists. He is the highest ideal for a human being and is a synthesis of beauty, knowledge, power, sublimity, and love. At the same time he is untouched by misery, action, results, or desire. He is the teacher of the ancient teachers; unlimited by time, space, and causation. He is infinite knowledge. Therefore, the human being has infinite dimensions which he reaches through thought and experience. Man prays for the evolution and illumination of his consciousness so that he can reach the perfect understanding.

Some conceive of God as the embodiment of freedom, limited as it were by time, space, and causation—maya or cosmic ignorance. The purpose of religion is to get our freedom through these different modes of worship. Therefore, religion will always remain, because the search for freedom will always exist in the heart of man. We may forget about the search, engrossed as we become in material enjoyment, but the fact of death, disease, and destruction in the subject-object world will remind us of this search and get us back to our effort.

Some people conceive of God as love. He attracts us through his unbounded love. He is the source of worldly attraction. Not knowing him we get attracted by the objects, get ourselves entangled and then cry for his help, and thus finally know that he was the basis of all attractions in the world. Thus the lowest individual is lifted to him and ultimately finds him. This path of love is comparatively easy for a human being to follow. Following this apparently easy path the seeker reaches the highest identity through that devotion where there is no fear and no reward because all duality-consciousness has been transcended.

Some others conceive of God as the embodiment of compassion. He is the merciful Father. He neither punishes nor rewards. We only reap the fruits of our own actions following the law of karma. His grace is available for all. He who unfurls his sails in the form of devotion, worship and self-effort, catches that wind of His grace and vision. He is like a magnet attracting the iron filings in the form of devotees and seekers, provided they are without any covering of rust or dirt. If the impurities are removed, everyone is included in His circle of compassion and mercy. It is a childish ideal to think that we suffer because God punishes us.

Some look to God as the source of supreme bliss. Every joy and happiness is his reflection. As He shines, everything shines. These ideas are very helpful while we contemplate God. We should not bring him down to the worldly level. He is the giver of salvation. We have an eternal relationship with Him and that is the basis of religion.

Two main concepts of God are the personal and impersonal. Both are very necessary for meditation. These are the two manifestations of the ultimate reality. The human being is conditioned to conceive of God as a person. He is endowed with human attributes such as love, knowledge, lordship, and providence. Most of the important religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, preach a personal God. He is the saviour and redeemer. We pray to Him and worship Him with various rituals. The personal God has enriched civilization throughout time, inspiring countless devotees to art, architecture and other noble human pursuits. As we are persons, our thinking, actions, behaviour, emotions, and feelings are influenced by a personal idea and hence the ideal of a personal God is inevitable so long as we are conscious of our individuality. It is because of this that prayers are possible and are answered. There are different relationships in a personal God such as dasya (servant), sakhya (friend), vatsalya (mother), and madhura (lover). The personal God also includes divine incarnations.

The impersonal cosmic intelligence is the same personal God without any attributes. He is Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute. God is, no doubt, impersonal, but that does not negate his personal manifestation. Even the highest soul when not absorbed in the transcendental state of consciousness thinks of a personal God. Meditating and worshipping the personal leads the spiritual seeker to the impersonal. God with form, God without form—both are real. That very reality which appears with form is also without form. The same water appears as ice

and, when heated, disappears as vapour but still exists. God with form and without form are only from the viewpoint of devotion and knowledge. The fire principle has no form of its own, but we see fire when it takes the form of the object it burns. The impersonal, from the standpoint of the relative world, is seen with many forms. God's aspects are innumerable. We should accept them all and not become dogmatic. Seen through the sense organs He appears as many. When we view him through mystical experience, He is one and present everywhere. A genuine devotee can take any aspect of God for contemplation. As his mind becomes pure he seeks deeper aspects. Sri Ramakrishna advised a widow devotee who was seeing the face of her baby nephew at the time of meditation to take that face as the face of Sri Krishna and meditate on it. We may take any aspect of Godhead with any of the relationships mentioned above and proceed with conviction toward the highest. With sincerity and earnestness as our motive powers we shall certainly reach the highest reading of God. All are His forms. We proceed with our Chosen Ideal, which facilitates our contemplation, and finally reach the total vision where all forms and all names merge like hundreds of rivers which ultimately merge into the ocean without a trace of name and form.

Meditation—What Does is Mean?

The whole universe is a manifestation of power in the form of energy or matter. The energy form of power is called thought, and the matter form of it is called the physical world. Examples of the first are the works of Plato, Shakespeare, Kalidas, Beethoven, the saints and sages. Examples of the second are railroads, steamships, skyscrapers, guided missiles, St. Peter's Cathedral, and the Taj Mahal. Behind the manifestation of the physical is the power of thought. This power of thought flows through the channel called mind. Trying to understand the mind, controlling it, and learning the secrets of inner and outer nature is called meditation. The words of the scriptures like, "...Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you"¹ can be rightly understood when we have the secret of meditation. This secret of meditation is most useful to writers, philosophers, business men and others. It gives a man the steadiness to keep up the course. Through meditation, mystics solve the mysteries of the universe, and the saints and seers realize the true nature of the soul and God. Let us discuss meditation as a spiritual discipline to realize higher truths.

Before meditation, we have to take the important step of preparing for meditation. Certain disciplines have to be followed and certain preparations have to be made in the inner world, and they are very important. Most of us complain that we cannot meditate, that our mind wanders and becomes unsteady, that there is no experience of inner life and so on and so forth. These complaints are entirely due to a lack of preparation for meditation. So, the first step, as far as preparations are concerned, is the performance of the daily obligatory duties determined by birth and social position. When we are born, we do not come with a clean slate. In our previous lives we have built up impressions which we bring with us. With these impressions and the environment, parents, relatives, and situations which surround us, we try to build ourselves up. By performing our duties we are slowly trained to regard ourself as an instrument by surrendering our actions and their results to God, the Creator and Controller of the universe. As we develop this attitude, we naturally become unaffected by the success or failure which we encounter, either in our estimation or the estimation made by the public, and become established in inner serenity. At this stage, we are not renouncing action, but we are renouncing self-seeking in action. We are renouncing the ego, selfishness and attachments, which are the main obstacles in our meditations. To perform the duties which have naturally come to us faithfully without selfishness or attachment, is a great spiritual discipline. It makes the heart pure and creates a proper mood for meditation.

The next important preparation is to develop unbounded faith in ourselves.

Let a man raise himself by his own self;
let him not debase himself. For he is
himself his friend, himself his foe.²

For the self is our friend and the self is our enemy depending on how we treat it. The very self of a man devoid of self-control is his own worst enemy.

The third preparation is a certain amount of indifference to external conditions, such as heat and cold, pain and pleasure, honour and dishonour. The next point is an inner contentment. This comes out of the conviction that God dwells within everyone. God's power and knowledge are present in everyone. We do not invoke that power and that knowledge; therefore, failures come, and we alone are responsible. Another very important preparation is the practice of fearlessness and chastity, which enables us to get control of the turbulent passions. Last but not least is the feeling of sameness and love for all; friends and foes, relatives and strangers alike. Through this we evolve.

After preparing ourselves for the preliminary stage of meditation, we begin the practical discipline. Going into solitude as often as possible forms the first discipline. The world is like an ocean in which we have waves, big and small, coming at us and disturbing the calmness of our mind. To the extent we are disturbed or not by these waves of the world, to that extent we shall be successes or failures in meditation. Our present life is like milk mixed with water. In order to remove the water from the milk, you must remove all disturbances from the mind. We have either to stop the disturbances by withdrawing into our mind, which is called solitude, or else strengthen our minds to such a degree that disturbances make no impression on us. We, therefore, make one thought the central thought of our life and keep other thoughts away. The central thought is God. Forgetting all worldly positions and all ideas of me and mine, we keep our mind focused on this thought. Even the idea of the body is forgotten, which helps in controlling the passions and desires.

For meditation we must select a clean spot and take a firm seat that is not too hard and keep our body as erect as possible, with the head, neck and spine in a straight line. We also have to take up the middle course by avoiding the two extremes in our eating, sleeping and working habits. Buddha called this “Madhyama Pantha”, the “Middle Path.”

Then, we come to the practice of concentration on God in the form of our Chosen Ideal. This ideal will come to us in two forms, personal and impersonal. Our Guru, or teacher, will recommend an appropriate symbol, which is suitable for our temperament. The symbol can be a word, a sound or an object. At first, our mind will be distracted quite often, yet, through love and affection, with sweet words and ideas, we can bring the mind back from the distracted position to our Chosen Ideal, like a mother who, by her love, wins her children over by using sweet words and by offering them something they like. Through steady practice and detachment, cultivated after observing the world outside, we can create the appropriate attitude of mind for meditation.

Dispassion towards the objects of the senses, and also absence of egoism; perception of evil in birth, death, old age, sickness and pain.³

As this practice and detachment slowly develops, the disturbed condition of the mind will be brought under control, and it will become one-pointed.

As a lamp in a windless place does not flicker, this is the simile used for the

disciplined mind of a yogi practising
concentration on the Self.⁴

Generally, the mind goes through three stages until it reaches the final experience of Sat-Chit-Ananda, the inner essence which is beyond name, form, and symbol. The first stage is called CONCENTRATION. The thought is interrupted, and the seeker has to make an effort to bring back the mind to concentrate on the form or symbol. As we progress, concentration develops into MEDITATION, where there is an uninterrupted flow of awareness.

The uninterrupted flow (of the mind)
towards the object is meditation.⁵

The second stage leads the aspirant to the beatitude and final fulfilment called SAMADHI. Then, one feels inner quiet and does not become disturbed by the turmoil of the world. Amidst a hurricane outside and the most disturbed condition inside, the contact with that inner joy is never lost. This joy is not due to an object of the senses outside but is an inner spiritual joy that passes all understanding. Real joy is in spirit not matter.

At such a stage, the mind is never upset by any disturbances of the world. Like the needle of a compass, it always points north. One is not disturbed by the heaviest of sorrows or the highest of joys, either physical or mental.

The mind is most difficult to bring under control. The mind is restless, turbulent and obstinate. It is like a monkey, which is restless by nature and, in addition, has drunk a bottle of wine and been stung by a scorpion.

Just as a gale pushes away a ship on the
waters, the mind that yields to the roving
senses carries away his discrimination.⁶

Such a mind has to be slowly brought to a restful state of awareness. It appears to be an impossible task, but with the help of regular practice and determination, the same restless mind attains the most restful state of awareness.

The standard discipline which is recommended by the world teachers is practice and detachment. Practice is the repeated effort to attain calmness, undaunted by failure. This goal is realized by austerity, chastity, faith, discrimination, and, above all, love; love for the ideal. The goal is immortality and fearlessness.

Detachment consists of seeing the transitoriness of the world. Whatever is seen is gone. Everything seen is non-eternal, limited in nature. The only eternal thing is God.

There are four obstacles to meditation:

1. LAYA: Lapse of the mental state into sleep.
2. VIKSHEPA: Resting of the mind on things other than the Absolute.

3. KASHAYA: Failure of the mental state to rest on the Absolute owing to numbness brought on by attachment.
4. RASASVADA: Resting of the mental state on the bliss of Savikalpa Samadhi (with form) without going forward to Nirvikalpa Samadhi (without form). This is a sort of attachment to a lower form of enjoyment.

All obstacles can be counteracted when the mind is brought under control. When it is lazy, invigorate it. When distracted, bring it back to calmness. When attached, be aware. When it is established in equipoise, do not distract it. Do not linger on the bliss that comes from a lower state of attunement. All four obstacles can be easily overcome by alertness. These four obstacles come from the inability of the mind to rest on God or Reality. One should go forward with sincerity and earnestness. Where there is sincere effort, the grace of God follows. This self-effort and grace of God put together ends with Self-knowledge or illumination and Samadhi.

What happens to a man who has given up worldly pleasures but cannot attain the spiritual goal? Is he lost like a patch of clouds? Such a one is never lost! He who follows the path of righteousness is never destroyed, he is always protected and taken care of. No spiritual effort is ever lost; it is one's own asset. A person who has failed to reach the goal may be born again with spiritual tendencies and the right conditions to pursue his spiritual path.

O Partha, neither in this world nor
in the next is there destruction for
him; for, the doer of good, O my son,
never comes to grief.

Having attained to the worlds of the
righteous and having lived there for
countless years, he who falls from
yoga is reborn in the house of the
pure and prosperous.

Or he is born in a family of wise yogis
only; a birth like this is verily very
difficult to obtain in this world.

There he regains the knowledge acquired
in his former body, and he strives more
than before for perfection, O joy of the Kurus.⁷

The mastery of meditation is a slow process and has to be realized steadily and patiently. God and the soul are eternal; there should be no hurry or restlessness. Time is eternal and opportunity is eternal. As soon as the impatience of the mind is removed through these thoughts, illumination will come in the twinkling of an eye. A bird sits on the mast of a ship and flies to the east looking for land. He finds no land. He flies north, south and west; still no land. Finally, he comes back to rest on the mast. Then, the ship itself brings him to land. In the same way, the mind wanders about, hoping

against hope, and finally settles into itself where Atman alone abides. Then, the mind discovers that nothing is gained or lost and finds its own home. The result of meditation is Self-knowledge. The Self is in all, and all are in the Self. This is the basis of true love. One feels for the happiness and sorrow of others as you regard them in yourself. This is the source of peace. This is the basis of ethics and morality. This is the basis of freedom and democracy. A man is not judged by the colour of his skin, wealth, or social position, but by his inner spirit. This inner abiding reality is everywhere. You see God in all and all in God.

Work Without Worry

The society in which we live is known for its worries. We work very hard to obtain all the amenities of life so that our life may be happy. But the more we work, the more conveniences we have, the more miserable we become. Why? Those who are attached to life seem to have considerable worries. Many of our physical ailments and mental ills are the result of such worries. Anxiety is second nature to us. We cannot seem to live without it. Therefore, we cannot enjoy any peace in our life without something always gnawing at our throat. What a joy it would be to be without anxiety! Detachment gives one the ability to understand this and to use this understanding to deal with life. People who are detached lead a happy life. Unfortunately, in our society a man succeeds not by his spirit of renunciation but by his desire for acquisition. A man is respected for what he possesses and is acclaimed for his desirousness. Those who have detachment are despised.

Even when we have no reason to do so we entertain negative ideas and court failure. Thus, an individual gets engulfed in worries and anxiety although all of us are potentially superb human beings who have emanated from God. We have tremendous potential which we do not tap. The method of tapping this potential is the secret of action. He who knows this secret will never be a failure. Actions are neither for enjoyment nor for suffering but are meant to teach us. The whole universe is a gymnasium where we develop our strength through actions. The third, fourth, and fifth chapters of the Bhagavad Gita clearly spell this out.

There is not a single individual in this world who can remain inactive even for a moment. Even in our sleep we are performing action. We must know the science of action. There are pairs of opposites which we continuously face in our life: desire or detachment, cold or warmth, suffering or happiness. Nobody can escape the pairs of opposites. Praise and blame both come to you. Be detached from either. According to Christ, one who builds his house on the road has many masters. Only when an individual has knowledge and discipline does he act with detachment and is free from fear of results. Such a person is the ideal frame of reference. There is always cheer in the lives of great men. For instance, even in the battlefield Lord Krishna was composed and smiling.

Each of the sense organs has a function; for instance, hand for touch and nose for smell. Each sense instrument is linked to an outside object. This is how the universe exists. All religions state that human beings are too much attached to the body and feelings related to body. This is the great bane of society. These feelings are transient. Winter is sure to be followed by spring. Since both the seasons are valuable to us, be patient and bear with the hardships. Nobody can change the nature of the universe and its laws. Yoga is the attitude of bearing everything. A yogi never gets perturbed by anything. Work hard toward your goals. When results are not in proportion to your efforts or expectations, do not worry or become nervous. In your disturbed state, do not blame everybody for your difficulties. Do not anticipate the results because you will get frustrated and angry when they are

not commensurate with your expectations. Anger comes from lack of self-control. He who has courage, understanding and knowledge is entitled to a balanced and happy life.

Satisfaction lies in playing your role with detachment toward the results. Ward off jealousy and hatred. Make sure that you have done your work well and that the result is not your main concern. Scriptures have to be studied and followed in our life. Work you must for maintaining yourself. Both renunciation and action will lead you to your goal. Both are of value. We are all caught in the quagmire of life. We raise ourselves by following the science of action toward excellence in life.

Man is a skilful role-player. Play your part well and develop the capacity to look at it objectively. Believe that everything belongs to God and that you are only a caretaker. Two words, chita and chinta, sound similar, but one means fire and the other, anxiety; one burns the dead and the other burns the living. Anxiety can tear you to pieces. It is in our control to lead a peaceful and joyful life. Material plenty is not a prerequisite for this. The three great enemies of human beings are: the desire for enjoyment, anger, and infatuation. All our anxieties and cares come out of these, and they must be overcome through self-control. Then we will know the secret of work without worry.

Sri Ramakrishna and His Message

Asia and Europe have been custodians of two types of culture, one type based on spiritual freedom, (Nihstreya), and the other type based on the well-being of the world, (Abhyudaya). Both types are necessary for stability and world order. Human beings are rooted in the earth, being born of the earth and brought up of the earth. Slowly, they evolve through their actions and knowledge. World order will bring, therefore, a natural development in their life. They need well-disciplined enjoyment to bring about detachment and knowledge. They need the help of the world to transcend the world.

Dispassion is not possible unless there is satiety through enjoyment. You can easily cajole a small child with candies or toys. But after eating the candies and finishing its play it cries, “I want to go to my mother!” Unless you take the child to its mother, it will throw away the toy and scream at the top of its voice.¹

The culmination of this process of evolution is spiritual freedom. The human being is a spiritual entity with a spiritual goal. But the two ideals of worldly success and spiritual freedom are not antagonistic—the firm structure of spiritual life must be based upon the foundation of a well-organized material life. In the West, we find that science forms the basis of the well-organized life of the earth. In the East, religion forms the basis of life, and we find the highest imagination and spiritual experience. With the help of science we have, to a certain extent, overcome suffering and disease. With the help of super-science, we can understand the Spirit and its immortality. If one aspect is pursued at the cost of the other, the scriptures give us a warning. The pursuit of science alone leads to darkness and blinding ignorance. The pursuit of super-science without the foundation of science brings greater darkness. We are lost in this world, as well as the other world, because we neglected the foundation. In the West, we find we are creating a demon with science, which threatens our very existence. In the East, we find that the neglect of science is responsible for poverty, disease, and suffering. These two ideals of East and West must be harmonized; both are necessary.

Generally speaking, human beings in the West are active and have done marvelous things in the field of action. Such people as Newton, Darwin, Washington, and Lincoln have been shining examples in the fields of politics and science. In the East, India in particular, men are contemplative. Out of this contemplation have come men such as Buddha, Ramakrishna, Krishna, a galaxy of them. Science and technology have the capacity of removing the boundaries of East and West. The East is

looking to the West for knowledge of science and technology, such as physics, chemistry, medicine, etc. The best of India's people are coming to the West to learn the principles of science, its theory and practice. In the same way, the West is searching for the science of yoga to harmonize and integrate the inner being, from body to soul. In the West, we discover that all the facilities and conveniences which have come with the help of science and technology have not solved our problems and will not be able to in the long run. This is because the leisure which we have created with the help of science is itself the cause of our misery.

The malady of the world is not materialistic but spiritual. Things are in abundance, sometimes there's super-abundance. This malady cannot be permanently cured with the help of politics, soldiers, or conferences. These are only patch-work methods. The world is sick today because human beings are obsessed with greed, lust for power and inordinate desire for sense enjoyment. Science cannot teach us how to control greed and lust, but the science of religion can. The science of religion has methods to cultivate an inner life. It's foundation is made of love, dedication, unselfishness, on which the inner life is based. Still, we need a living religious ideal, not one based on mere dogmas and creeds. We need an actual demonstration, not mere tradition. We need a religion based on experience and reason, not merely supported by faith; a religion whose validity lies with inner life and experience and not on powerful acquisitions or palatial homes. Men of religious experience have said, "Man shall not live by bread alone."² Much spiritual inspiration has come from Asia. India has given the world two great religions: Hinduism and Buddhism. Through these two religions, Indian thinkers, sages, and incarnations have taught the spirit of renunciation to all the seekers of truth. They have shown how little a man needs to actually keep together body and soul in a well-disciplined and controlled life. This enables him to discover the inner truth by experience and then share that experience with all, without any thought of gain or profit.

May the sons of Immortal Bliss hearken
to me—even they who occupy celestial
regions!³

I know this mighty Purusha whose colour is
like the Sun, beyond the reach of darkness.
He only who knows him leaves Death behind
him. There is no path save this alone to travel.⁴

The Indian Sages taught:

1. THE INNER REALITY OF THE SOUL
2. THE DIVINE PRINCIPLE IN HUMAN BEINGS
3. THE HARMONY OF RELIGIONS
4. THE ONENESS OF THE UNIVERSE

The sages taught us to be ready to learn from others and to share with others whatever is needed for a totally enriched life. Thus, similar cultures developed in China, Burma, and Sri Lanka. The Eastern countries were also influenced by the culture of near-Eastern countries, such as Greece. Throughout

her history, India has produced men of contemplation and deep thinking. Sri Ramakrishna, a descendent in the line of Krishna, Buddha and other prophets, was born in 1836. He gave up his body in 1886, a short fifty years later. He was born to poor parents who were simple village folk. He had a passion for spiritual life, meditation and prayer right from the start. He attended on holy men and heard from them about spiritual and mystical experiences. He had Samadhi and experienced full attunement when he was barely six years old, indicating his latent spiritual tendencies. Yet, he was full of fun and childish joy. Coming to Calcutta, a busy city of the rich and educated, he refused to go to school, labeling all schools as the centers of “bread and butter winning” education. He observed the life of the educated and intellectual and compared them to vultures, soaring high, talking lofty thoughts, while their hearts were fixed on vain desires. He asked himself, “Is it possible to lead a pious life and commune with God if I live in the city life of Calcutta?”

His religious life received new impetus when he accepted the post of priest in the Divine Mother's Temple at Dakshineswar. Yearning and longing became the only two pursuits of his priestly duties. He wanted to know whether the Divine Mother was a living embodiment of truth and reality, which could be seen with eyes opened or closed. In his own words, “Could I speak with my Mother?” He went without food and sleep, weeping only for the vision of God. To the Westerner, all this is impractical. It does not add to your income. It does not add to political and social freedom. Therefore, they label such people as starry-eyed dreamers and say they are without practicality and are not fit to live in the modern world. They deserve only poverty and degradation. Swami Vivekananda viewed it otherwise. He said that “The cause of India's downfall was the neglect of religion. Intensify her spiritual life and India will rise again, earning the respect of all the world.”

Sri Ramakrishna asked himself again and again before the image of the Divine Mother, “Is it real or only poetry and imagination?” Sometimes, scepticism confused him. If God was not real, then what was real? Is the life of the world real? Life, as we understand it, is momentary. All the people who pursue the momentary life, including the educated, are they not fools? The wealthy, the poor, the powerful, the weak, the aristocratic, the downtrodden, are they not all fools? The truth is: man is born, suffers and dies. Our little life is rounded with a sleep. The paths of glory lead but to the grave. After serious questioning, he heard an irreproachable voice which told him, “There is everlasting life, immeasurable happiness, and abiding peace, but it belongs to the realm of spirit, which is attained only by purity and self-control.” This is called the vision of God. This God-Realization possessed the imagination of the boy and young man in him. He had no book learning. He had only one prayer: he would learn only if the Divine Mother were herself to teach him.

He followed all the spiritual disciplines and came to the conclusion that there are three main obstacles impeding our aspirations in getting to the truth, the vision of God. One is greed, the second is pride and the third is lust. He was able to overcome all three by leading an austere life of truth and purity. Again the practical and impractical Hindu aspirant thought to himself, “How could one have food and drink without God? Man can't live on bread alone.” Again the voice came, “We can't live without God.” All the gold in Fort Knox will not bring inner food to millions of people. They need only two pieces of bread and butter. India has created a balance of millions of pounds in England, and still millions of people in India are going hungry. The illness of the world is spiritual not material.

At last, his violent hunger was satisfied with the vision of God. He saw God as the Divine Mother. He then tried different ways of seeing God by following different paths. He practiced the disciplines of Christianity and Islam and found that they were like two rivers flowing into the same infinite

ocean. People flocked around him; educated and uneducated, poor and wealthy, men and women, all felt the touch of his blessing. Their eyes were filled with tears and their ears were satisfied by the words coming from his blessed mouth because he radiated purity and truth. People felt pure and uplifted, for he made God vivid and real to all. He showered love equally on all men and women and criticized no one. Thus, He became a world teacher.

He left his body in 1886. His principal disciple, Swami Vivekananda, carried his message to the West. He was the spiritual bridge, and out of his message was born the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in India and the Vedanta Societies in the West, with the twin ideals:

For the highest freedom of the self
and the good of the world.

Swami Vivekananda's message consisted mainly of spiritual life and the realization of God. Man can be perfect, and he can be the perfect image of God in human form. Life is unsubstantial without the knowledge of God. God dwells in all hearts and makes life worthwhile. Human life is a means to spiritual life. The two main disciplines to be practised are discrimination and detachment. Not all can practise them, and fewer still can get the experience through discipline and become teachers to mankind. Prayer in solitude is a practical means to prepare oneself for the final goal. One should pray and worship with the utmost sincerity, that is what he showed. He also said, "We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true."⁵ Everyone is valuable in the world. Each person reflects the presence of God. A broomstick appears to be insignificant, but it has the capacity to clean all dirt. With humility, sincerity, and purity one can realize God and feel His presence all the time. Sri Ramakrishna's every act and every word inspires the human being to reach the final goal of life. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Sri Ramakrishna's life enables us to see God."⁶

Sri Ramakrishna and the Ideal of a Universal Religion

The distinctive feature of modern science is the study of the universe. In the 18th, 19th and beginning of the 20th century, this study was limited to separate compartments and an interconnection was not found or stressed. In the later years of the 20th century, this interconnection has been realized by some scientists, and we have come to a stage where the thin and faint line of demarcation is almost gone. We now find that scientists are actually speaking of the “oneness of the universe”. This is the nature of the universe in modern times. Likewise a distinctive feature of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings is the harmony of religions. His was a unique conception, formed by his spiritual realization and experiences. It is not like the intellectual professor of comparative religion nor is it like any other prophet. Sri Ramakrishna practised different faiths and disciplines, discovering that all lead to the selfsame goal. Each and every faith can lead one to a universal religion.

Certain factors that helped Sri Ramakrishna cultivate a universal and catholic attitude were as follows:

HINDU HERITAGE

By whatsoever way men worship Me, even
so do I accept them; for, in all ways,
O Partha, men walk in My path.¹

Higher than Myself there is nothing
else, O Dhananjaya (Arjuna). In Me
all this is strung like gems in a string.²

They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna,
Agni, and he is heavenly nobly-winged
Garutman. To what is One, sages give
many a title: they call it Agni, Yama,
Matarisvan.³

As rivers, flowing down, become
indistinguishable on reaching the sea
by giving up their names and forms,
so also the illumined soul, having
become freed from name and form,

reaches the self-effulgent Purusha
that is higher than the high (Maya).⁴

Whatever thing is glorious, excellent or
pre-eminent, verily, know that is born of
a portion of My splendour.⁵

We find in the history of Hinduism that no one has ever been persecuted by a Hindu for his religious convictions. A number of religious teachers from different sects have criticized Hinduism, yet they have never been persecuted for it. Buddha himself repudiated Hindu belief with strong words and continued a safe life of 80 years. He not only was not persecuted but was recognized as an Incarnation. There are several non-Hindu faiths which function side by side with the Hindus.

FAMILY WORSHIP OF DIFFERENT DEITIES

As in most Hindu families, Sri Ramakrishna's family worshipped various deities. These deities were different aspects of the same Godhead. In front of his house at Kamarpukur there was a temple of Shiva. The family deity was Sri Rama. It was Vishnu who appeared in a vision to his father at Gaya. Sitala, the mother of the universe, was also worshipped. This broadened Sri Ramakrishna's ideal of religion.

HOLY COMPANY

His companionship with monks during his boyhood was a great factor in forming his early character. The wandering monks would stop in Kamarpukur on their way to Puri. Sri Ramakrishna as a boy would wait on them, listening all the while to their spiritual adventures. They belonged to different sects and performed different rituals with different symbols for their meditations and worship; still Ramakrishna was able to see a common feature in them all. He also discovered that the holy men and teachers had the "one principle" in life, which was renunciation. They had no attachments for anything of the world, only a deep and sincere longing for realization of God! They practised meditation and had tremendous control and purity. He also discovered that all faiths have unanimity in the essentials. The differences rested in the non-essentials. In later years he would tell the story of the chameleon.

Once a man entered a wood and saw a small animal on a tree. He came back and told another man that he had seen a creature of a beautiful red colour on a certain tree. The second man replied: "When I went into the wood, I also saw that animal. But why do you call it red? It is green." Another man who was present contradicted them both and insisted that it was yellow. Presently others arrived and contended that it

was grey, violet, blue, and so forth and so on. At last they started quarrelling among themselves. To settle the dispute they all went to the tree. They saw a man sitting under it. On being asked, he replied: “Yes, I live under this tree and I know the animal very well. All your descriptions are true. Sometimes it appears as red, sometimes yellow, and at other times blue, violet, grey, and so forth. It is a chameleon. And sometimes it has no colour at all. Now it has a colour, and now it has none.”

In like manner, one who constantly thinks of God can know His real nature; he alone knows that God reveals Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects. God has attributes; then again He has none. Only the man who lives under the tree knows that the chameleon can appear in various colours, and he knows, further, that the animal at times has no colour at all. It is the others who suffer from the agony of futile argument.⁶

DAKSHINESWAR

The temples at Dakshineswar and their atmosphere of religious synthesis had an impact on his life. The central image was that of Kali, the Mother. She was the totality of life and death. At the other end was Shiva, the Absolute. Without him Kali cannot stand or create the universe. Shiva is popular in representing renunciation and is easy to satisfy, “Ashutosha.” No priest is needed between the devotee and Shiva. Their connection is direct. He will accept from the devotee even a drop of water or a leaf. On the other hand, the worship of Kali is intricate and requires a variety of rituals and ingredients. In another part of the temple is Radha and Krishna, the symbol of natural attraction and ecstatic love, which conquer fear and seek no return. Together they represent song, music, dance. Sri Ramakrishna lived and worshipped in that atmosphere, enabling him to see unity in diversity. In addition to that, a number of holy men would come to visit the temple. He would be able to have conversations with them for a number of days and nights. He was able to learn from them and at the same time teach them.

HINDU SECTS

Sri Ramakrishna followed the Tantras, Vedas, Upanishads and the disciplines of love in various stages, personal and impersonal. He went through intricate rituals and meditation and communed with Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Kali, Vishnu and ultimately realized identity with them all and with the absolute Brahman, without name and form. His life became a laboratory of religious experience. That is why his teachings attracted so many people of different backgrounds and religions. Everyone discovered that he or she had a place with him.

ISLAM

Sri Ramakrishna accepted a Muslim teacher and dressed and behaved like a devoted Muslim. He would practise mystic devotions repeating Allah's name. During this period he avoided the Kali Temple, living outside the precincts. He soon had a vision of Mohammed, who then entered into his body. He had the experience of "Pure Brahman," which indicated that Islam was also a valid faith to be practised by some.

CHRISTIANITY

Sri Ramakrishna would listen to the reading of the Bible and would visit the Christian Church. During that period he received a vision of the Madonna and Child. For three days Christ possessed his soul. On the fourth day, at the Panchavati, he had a vision of a tall foreigner, a beautiful person with large eyes, serene countenance and fair skin. From the bottom of his heart, he heard the words, "Jesus! Jesus the Christ, the great Yogi, the loving Son of God, one with the Father, who gave his heart's blood and put up with endless torture in order to deliver men from sorrow and misery!"⁷ Christ then entered into his body. He again had the realization of the oneness, without name or form.

BUDDHISM

Sri Ramakrishna also accepted Buddha's teaching, at the same time accepting and respecting Jainism and Sikhism.

Sri Ramakrishna was a pious Hindu teacher with an overwhelming love of God. He broke all the barriers of dogmas and rituals. Thus, he found the secret of a "Universal Religion". We can know by the study of past history that religion has one binding tie, love. At the same time, a study of religious history shows periods of intolerable conflicts, where brother fought against brother, son against father. The conflicts were all inspired by dogmas and creeds. Even blood relationships were ignored by this fanaticism. In the last 2000 years, history has shown us several such conflicts. Sri Ramakrishna with his unique spiritual experiences, which were expressed and exemplified through his teaching, came with his illustrious disciple, Swami Vivekananda, to give us the example of harmony and real brotherhood inspired by divinity. He has shown to the whole world the solution to this never ending problem for the human race. Therefore, he is unique among all the teachers of mankind. His teaching was not based only on thought or dry rhetoric. He lived his thought of the harmony of religions and experienced it. He showed humanity how to overcome this conflict which has plagued it for so long. Sri Ramakrishna's message was brought to the Western world by Swami Vivekananda in 1893. He spelt it out openly at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago,

Illinois. When the message was given, people were forced to listen, but only a few were capable of understanding.

There were several factors on which this harmony of religions was based:

1. The Godhead has infinite aspects, some of which are love, power, justice, prayer, silence. Each religion takes up at least one of these aspects and spends its entire life force in presenting it to the public.
2. All religions are complimentary and not antagonistic.
3. Climatic conditions and environment play an important part. For example, the excessive cold in Europe and America, the excessive heat and dryness in the Arab countries, have all to some extent an effect on the people and create a certain temperament.

A diversity of religions is, no doubt, desirable. At the same time, it creates many of our problems. Diversity allows us to have choice and freedom. Uniformity, on the other hand, stunts one's growth of thinking and, in many cases, kills the process itself. A clash of thoughts produces new thoughts. The Hindu thought has made a silent impact wherever it has travelled, introducing to all an inward activity which is available to us by means of meditation and solitude. On the other hand, Christian thought has brought to other parts of the world a spirit of love and social service. This diversity, unfortunately, has brought about fanaticism, quarrels and even wars. Religion has produced two effects on society: peace and love, a strong binding tie; and quarrels and conflicts, creating hatred. Out of brotherhood came many wonderful examples of love, such as charitable institutions. Enmity, on the contrary, begot bloodshed and eternal hatred. Still, all religions speak of God as the source of love. They teach peace on earth and goodwill to all.

Many sincere people become disgusted with the religious conflicts and become disinterested in religions. Those who still follow the essentials of religion lead a moral and ethical life because of their deep interest in humanitarism. Such people appreciate and love music, art, literature and philosophy. Still, this is not enough! Ethical and moral life are not sufficient to attain a higher spiritual experience. They are poor substitutes for real religion. Only "true religion" can suppress the lower nature of man. Social service no doubt creates a certain amount of satisfaction and happiness, but the peace which comes from contemplation and the inner search transforms the human being and leads him to higher experience and communion.

WHY DO RELIGIONS QUARREL?

There are three parts to religion:

1. Philosophy: Philosophy is the essence of religion and deals with the nature of God, soul and the hereafter. Though it is the essence of religion, it is too abstract for the average person to comprehend.
2. Mythology: Philosophy expressed by anecdotes and stories puts the same abstract principles into the concrete form known as mythology. The constituents of mythology are legends, stories and the lives of great men and supernatural beings. The story of man's fall from perfection in the Old Testament, Noah's ark, the four cycles of Hinduism are all inspiring. They point out to man his weaknesses, at the same time inspiring him to reach higher and higher levels of excellence. Myths

have inspired both art and literature. Works such as the Sistine Chapel, the Last Supper, the caves of Ajanta, the excellent poetic works of Dante, Milton, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata. These are just a few examples of the myths in religious history. Myths deepen spiritual life and stir up the imagination, stimulating the love of God.

3. Rituals: They are still more concrete for they include forms, ceremonies, flowers, lights, candles, postures, movements of the body and limbs, all of which appeal to the senses and create motivation to go towards the higher truths. All religions contain rituals. The rituals among the Christians of all shades, the Hindus and all their sects, and the followers of Islam, praying in their Mosque, when studied and approached properly, lead us to harmony and understanding. Ultimately, rituals are found to be nonessential yet necessary for the beginner. We are all really beginners in this vast field of religious experience. A small plant requires a hedge for its protection.

Religions seem to quarrel because of too much emphasis given to their own part of the hedge. So much stress is given to rituals and mythology that philosophy and direct experience are almost neglected. There is always confusion over the means and the end. Devotees quarrel over the baskets and the contents of them are forgotten. Fanatics accept the validity of their own rituals and mythology but condemn the rituals and myths of others. Thus conflict continues. Never thinking for one moment about what is being accomplished in their own life, they spend their life force in condemning others. Add to this another force which enters into religion, "power politics." The story of religion in the past is almost always filled with wars, quarrels, massacres, and crusades. If these fanatics could be guided by the thinking people of the world, there would be a golden age for humanity.

We live in an age of science, and inquiries are directed to the nature outside. Scientists are drawn to the phenomena of nature, but religion still appeals to the human mind. Religious articles, music, churches and temples attract the attention of people. Peace and happiness cannot be achieved through diplomacy or armament but through application of the principles of religion. With the help of modern science and technology, man has been successful in eliminating distances. Humanity has been brought together, and a close connection with nations and congregations has enabled us to understand each other. We have discovered the interdependence among human and subhuman species.

CAN THERE BE A UNIVERSAL RELIGION?

It is not a new idea. Islam and Christianity tried to be a world religion through military conquest and persuasion and have miserably failed. Other religions have grown in importance during the past few centuries. Ecumenical religions and ethical movements, such as Theosophy and the Bahai faith, have sprung up in the last two centuries, but they are only like a bouquet of flowers. They have a different inside from what is seen on the outside. From the outside they may show universal tendencies, but from the inside they may consist of something quite different. Religion is not a product of intellectual gymnastics, it is the experience of the saints and mystics.

Sri Ramakrishna's conception of a universal religion was entirely based upon his own direct experiences. It was not something created by him but already existing in him. It is something which must be uncovered and rediscovered. Spiritual practice is the means to this uncovering. Through purity, truthfulness, straightforwardness and childlike simplicity the truth is realized. God is the universal religion underlying all faiths. The mystics of all religions place God above all myths, doctrines and dogmas. They have direct experience. With universal brotherhood, they rise above all

national prejudice and customs. With this experience you find that your brother is everywhere.

CAN WE PROMOTE A UNIVERSAL RELIGION?

It becomes possible to promote a universal religion if we keep certain principles in mind.

1. One has to recognize the necessity of variation because it stimulates an individual's thinking and allows him a choice. It gives one an opportunity to pick his spiritual disciplines and doctrines.
2. We should not condemn the rituals and myths of any other religion. They enrich the spiritual life of us all.
3. Variation points out the fact that all religions are a means to an end and not the end in itself. This understanding leads one to Nishta (conviction) and Bhakti (love of God). One should not jump, out of curiosity and impulse, from one religious faith to another. We should not destroy but build up, giving man a push upwards from where he stands. We should not criticize any man's symbols but deepen his devotion so he will realize that symbols are not God but a means to reach Him. Thus, we will be able to give up fanaticism. There is no perfect religion, but God himself is perfect. Christ declared that in his Father's house there are many mansions. The Upanishads declare that diversity disappears when the truth is realized.

When all the knots of the heart are destroyed, even while a man is alive, then a mortal becomes immortal. This much alone is the instruction (of all the Upanishads).⁸

As Sri Krishna declares in the Bhagavad Gita:

Higher than Myself there is nothing else,
O Dhananjaya (Arjuna). In Me all this is
strung like gems in a string.⁹

Sri Ramakrishna's Contribution to Modern Thought

Two major religions of the world, Hinduism and Christianity, accept the doctrine of an incarnation of God appearing in tangible human form on the human plane. While Christianity accepts this concept, it emphasizes that God came only in the form of Christ as “the son of God,”—a unique phenomenon, never seen in the past nor to be seen in the future. Hinduism, on the other hand, takes it as a universal spiritual law. God has always appeared in human form in His world, which is His creation, whenever it was necessary to do so. This universal law has been spelt out by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita:

Whenever, O descendant of Bharata,
righteousness declines and unrighteousness
prevails, I manifest Myself. For
the protection of the righteous and
the destruction of the wicked, and
for the establishment of religion, I
come into being from age to age.¹

He is omnipotent, omniscient, and almighty spirit. Nothing is impossible for Him. But we are human beings; divine truths have to be brought to the human level. Transcendental truths must be tuned to human understanding to be grasped by us. Although all the spiritual truths are given in scriptures, still we need interpretation and demonstration by a teacher in human form in order to fully absorb these truths. As long as man identifies himself with body and mind, he needs a humanized God. People then refer to Him as an Incarnation, God-man, or Son of God, and thus establish an intimate relationship with Him as Father, Mother, Friend, Child, etc.

An Incarnation manifests Himself at times of spiritual crisis when secular values and ideals appear to be getting the upper hand and seem about to disrupt and ultimately destroy the orderly universe. The Incarnation restores the balance between the secular and the spiritual. Moses restored justice and the belief in the reality of one God. Christ cut through the religious hypocrisy of his time and established the “kingdom of God” with grace and love through prayer and surrender. Buddha removed the abuse of Vedic rituals by trafficking priests and taught the way of Enlightenment for all through desirelessness and moral and ethical conduct. Shankaracharya revived and justified the essentials of Vedic rituals, eschewed meaningless philosophical speculations, and established with the help of scriptures, reason, and experience, the reality of Brahman—one without the second. Sri Ramakrishna, in our age, demonstrated through his life and character that God is the Truth, and He can

be seen and realized in this very life with the conquest of lust and greed. He also practised the disciplines of different faiths in order to taste the Bliss of God. In the modern age the problem of secularism and its attendant evils is driving the human race to a great crisis and ultimately toward destruction. Science and technology unsupported by spiritual ideals have brought about the present situation. Man's goal in life has become pleasure and the power derived from the investigation of the universe through the scientific method. What was begun in the seventeenth century with modest means has gradually spread to the common man, giving rise to restlessness, discontent, and frustration.

In the pre-scientific age, Europe had a different climate. People had, by and large, faith in the fatherly God in heaven. Christ was the representative of God on earth, and His teachings were a source of moral law and strength. The existence of vice was recognised, but virtue was sought after through the life of faith. Virtue was expected ultimately to triumph through the life of faith. It was felt that pious people would be rewarded with peace and happiness in heaven. His teaching gave people courage, hope, and faith.

However, slowly and steadily, the Church increased its power. Reason was not given any importance and free thinking was discouraged. Dogmas and creeds gradually got the upper hand. The “kingdom of God” became the “kingdom of Man.” Secular values eclipsed spiritual values. God was found to be an unnecessary hypothesis and was replaced by self-evolving, self-preserving, and self-dissolving Nature. Darwin brought about a great turning point in human thought with his concept of the evolution of human life from matter. In the course of three and a half billion years, it is thought, man has evolved from stars through plants and animals. Blind instinct evolved into reason; through reason science and technology developed; and with their help a human being is capable of eliminating all that is evil in life. Thus, there is no necessity of postulating the existence of God. Science and technology are responsible for mass-production and mass-communication. They, in their turn, have fostered dry, routine mechanization in human life. Man is seeking new excitements every day and still he remains unsatisfied.

On November 18, 1964, in an attempt to discover the real cause of the present unrest in every fabric of human society and to devise a means for establishing peace on earth, a number of distinguished world-leaders met in New York. Yet on the very day prior to their meeting, four men were arrested for plotting to blow up the Statue of Liberty, the Washington Monument, and the Liberty Bell; forty Brooklyn youths were fighting in a railway station, a bomb blasted a gate of the Vatican in Rome, and a new warning came that the super-powers of the world were expanding their atomic arsenals! This is only one example of the general discontent that has been spreading everywhere. Abundance and poverty are seen side by side. Suspicion and fear poison relationships between nations. Destructive weapons are used to preserve a precarious peace through the balance of terror. Man feels he has no free will but rather is a helpless gadget in the world-machine created by science and technology. Evolution emphasizes man's animal heritage, though he is an image of God. In materially prosperous countries, there is an abundance of worries, neuroses, strikes, drunkenness, family break downs, juvenile delinquency, etc. The whole world is haunted by some unknown fear. Let us now try to ponder a little, with this background of the present unrest created by modern science and technology. Let us project Sri Ramakrishna's life against this backdrop of the modern situation and its problems; individual, social, national, and international. Sri Ramakrishna was not a social reformer or a political agitator. He was simply a genuine lover of God. He put his finger on the sore spots in society which he diagnosed as “kamini kanchana”—lust or sensuality, gross or refined, and

greed, marked or subtle. The resultant world-malady is spiritual malaise. Man finds he is not at peace with God and therefore not with himself, his fellow creatures, or the universe. There are three escapes from this predicament: 1. downward through drinking, sensuality, gambling, and other such methods; 2. sideways through art, dance, music, philanthropy, or literature; and 3. upward through communion with God. Sri Ramakrishna showed the upward way through his life and teachings.

It will be worthwhile to take a short pilgrimage through some events of his life. He was born in a small village untouched by modern civilization. Perhaps no Western man ever visited his village during his lifetime. Now it is a place of pilgrimage for people from all over the world. He had God-fearing parents, who were magnanimous in hospitality and utterly simple and truthful. They were poor but contented. Prophets are generally born and brought up in such family circumstances. Those of the world teachers who are born in princely families embrace voluntary poverty. Perhaps poverty increases receptivity to spiritual teachings. His was an extraordinary childhood—he was merry, full of fun, and always inclined to religious activities. He loved singing devotional songs and had a melodious voice which enthralled his devotees later in life. Through these songs he created a very high spiritual atmosphere around him. He was indifferent to modern education. Professor Max Muller, in his biography of Sri Ramakrishna, observes that Sri Ramakrishna's teaching was effective because it was unadulterated by modern education. He loved solitude and spent his time in intense worship and prayer. He was brought to Calcutta by his elder brother to further his education. But Sri Ramakrishna did not show interest in education which would bring him only bread and butter. He used to say that scholars were like vultures that soar very high in the sky, but their attraction is to a rotten piece of flesh on the ground. He had a wonderful power of assimilating what he heard from scholars about Vedanta and religion and explained to devotees the abstruse spiritual truths in simple language—a curious phenomenon in the lives of all prophets. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is the embodiment of his teachings. In 1835, Macaulay, a representative of Western ideas and ideals, introduced in India, through the English language, a system of education, which was most aggressive, rational, and dynamic. In this way, Western ideas began to filter into educated Indian minds. In 1859, Darwin's presentation of *The Origin Of Species* proved to be a landmark in the development of Western science. Its repercussions were felt by English-educated Indians. At that psychological hour, Sri Ramakrishna was absorbed in spiritual practices in the temple-garden of Dakshineswar, unknown to human society at large, not subjected to the pressures of the modern news media. The mission of his life was to combat modern secularism and reestablish the eternal principles of Hinduism. A peculiarity of Hindu social reformers is that, though perhaps cognizant of non-Hindu thought, they are always inspired chiefly by the Indian sages, as distinct from St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas whose ideas were evolved from Greek thought.

Sri Ramakrishna accepted the position as a worshipper in the temple-garden at Dakshineswar, where the principle deity is Kali, the Divine Mother. He used to look upon the deity as his own mother. The other two deities in the temple are Radha-Krishna, a symbol of divine love, and Shiva, a symbol of asceticism and renunciation. All these deities represented the harmony of religions. He soon developed intense longing for the vision of the Divine Mother and gave up the rituals involved in formal worship. This intensity he later compared with the attraction of a chaste wife for her husband, the mother for her child, and the miser for his wealth. He almost completely forgot food and other physical needs and did not sleep for a number of years. He sometimes spent the whole day in meditation in the Panchavati, a grove of five types of trees. Through this intense longing, he had the

first vision of the Divine Mother and felt himself to be floating in an ocean of bliss. He desired to remain completely absorbed in this divine ecstasy and did not follow any traditional scriptural injunction. The sole content of his spiritual life at that time was spiritual prayer and longing. He later wanted to follow the traditional disciplines to find out whether those disciplines were valid. Teachers came one after another and initiated him into different modes of worship. Due to one-pointed concentration, purity of mind, and utter non-attachment to the world, he quickly experienced different aspects of the Godhead described in the Hindu scriptures. He had a vision of Kali, the Divine Mother, Krishna, Rama, Shiva, and also experienced the highest non-dualistic state of oneness with the Ultimate Reality (Brahman). This is the culmination of man's spiritual endeavour. He also practised the principles of Christianity and Islam and arrived at the same conclusion. All his visions of the personal God finally led to the experience of the Impersonal Brahman. This Impersonal Spirit is the basis of the harmony of religions. A worshipper of the personal God can show respect to other faiths. He demonstrated through his personal life that all religions ultimately lead sincere aspirants to the same goal of pure Spirit. A circle may have many points on the circumference but all radii ultimately end with the centre. This is Sri Ramakrishna's contribution to the realm of religion.

While practising spiritual disciplines, he was considered abnormal by people who observed him. Of course, from their point of view he was abnormal. If he were a normal man like us, he would not have been a messenger of God, as he was—nay, God Himself! Yet people thought that he was insane. In our society, to be considered sane we must share the insanity of the neighbourhood. Rumours of his insanity disturbed his mother. She made a proposal for his marriage. He accepted the proposal, seeing in it the hand of the Divine Mother. It was indeed a unique marriage. Sarada Devi, the proposed wife, was his peer in every respect: utterly pure, guileless, and a simple village girl. Looking at a tuber-rose, she would pray to God to keep her as pure as the rose. Looking at the moon, she would again pray to God to keep her spotless as the moon. When she first visited Sri Ramakrishna, her husband in Dakshineswar, her age was eighteen. He asked her if she had come to drag him down to worldliness. She replied that she had come to help him in realizing his Chosen Ideal. They were spiritual companions to each other, unaffected by worldliness. After Sri Ramakrishna gave up the body in 1886, his wife assumed the responsibility of a spiritual successor; for her name was Sarada, the giver and source of knowledge. Thereafter, she helped thousands of men and women on the spiritual path. Even after giving up her body in 1920, she continues to inspire millions on this path from all parts of the world.

The period of discipline being over and all doubts resolved, Sri Ramakrishna attained the highest peace. He came to know who he was and what was his mission. He knew that he was an incarnation of God, as Rama and Krishna were in earlier ages, and that his mission was to restore the lost spiritual values. People from Calcutta and nearby places flocked around him. All felt uplifted after listening to his words and being in his holy company. He exhorted people to follow their religious faith with sincerity and assured them that they would ultimately realize God. He became a source of refuge for all religious seekers. He would say, "Whoever has sincerely called on God or performed his daily religious devotions will certainly come here."² This is the meaning of Christ's saying, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."³ Those who come to him will either accept the validity of the eternal religious principles demonstrated by him or will accept him as their Ishta or Chosen Ideal. To them he brought assurance of grace and liberation.

These are his principal teachings: God exists. The goal of human life is God-realization. God dwells in us all covered by a veil of Maya or ignorance. It is the ego which, with the help of attachment, greed, lust, and other evils, creates and fosters this veil of Maya. When Maya is overcome, God becomes revealed. The most important disciplines for the realization of God are renunciation of lust and greed. He demonstrated the method of overcoming lust and greed in daily life. All women are manifestations of the Divine Mother—even a fallen woman. He never thought of them in any other way, even in a dream. He gave spiritual status to all women by viewing them as the embodiment of Shakti. He had no attachment to any material thing; he could not even touch a coin without feeling as if he were stung by a scorpion. He would teach the householders to live in the world like a mud-fish which lives in mud without ever allowing itself to be soiled, or like a maidservant who lives in the family of her employer taking all care of his property without becoming attached to it. Sri Ramakrishna showed that renunciation is possible even in this secular age. Through God's grace and their own self-effort all can control attachment. He never harped on the idea of sin. Sins are mistakes we make at lower stages of evolution. God is compassionate; He knows our limitations. If we ask His forgiveness and then resolve not to repeat our errors, we are forgiven—even the greatest sinners amongst us. People of the modern world are plagued with suspicion and fear because they see diversity alone and not the unity of God in whom we live and move and have our being. Sri Ramakrishna taught that we should see Him in all and all in Him, and develop respect for life at all levels. This is the remedy for violence and hatred. This may not be possible for all, but a few can realize it and be free, and the free can show others the way to freedom. If we sincerely aspire for freedom from bondage, we can have it here and now. That is the lesson we learn from the wonderful life of Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna—The Awakener of Souls

Sri Ramakrishna was not a philosopher or an organizer or a politician. He was not the leader of a church. He died practically unknown. Yet within a short time he is becoming familiar to intellectual and spiritual seekers, inspiring all in selfless work, education and philanthropy. He is regarded as the “Awakener of Souls.”

Sri Ramakrishna's life was simple and pure. He was unsophisticated and lived a life of inspiration built on prayer and communion with God. He was born on the 18th of February, 1836, of Brahmin parents who were devoted to tradition. His father was an austere man with simple, worshipful habits. He was devoted to truth and a pure life. His mother was a kind and gentle woman. She was most loving in her attitude. Gadadhar, who was to become Sri Ramakrishna, was a healthy boy. He had a restless nature and was full of fun, sweet though mischievous. He loved the stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. He had his first spiritual ecstasy at the age of six as he was walking on the trails of a paddy field. A flock of white cranes flew in front of a background of dark clouds. The sight inspired him greatly, and his simplicity of head and heart resulted in the blissful experience of Samadhi.

Circumstances of life brought him to Calcutta where his brother accepted the duty of priest in the Kali Temple at Dakshineswar. Young Gadadhar accepted the responsibility of assisting his brother in his priestly duties and was quite enthusiastic in worship. He put one hundred per cent of his mind and body into work at this time. His first shock in life had come at the death of his father, causing the brothers to come to Calcutta. Now came the second shock, his brother's passing. This intensified his spiritual search.

When his brother had asked him, “Why don't you go to school like the other children?”, young Gadai had answered, “This is not the education I need. This is only bread and butter winning education.” This reply sums up the materialistic education of our time. At present education is not concerned with the worship of God or the freedom of the soul. It is concerned with name, fame, power to dominate—none of which help to realize our goal in life. Young Gadadhar received much more help by associating with the holy men who passed by his home. He spent hours in talking with them and received from them his “real” education. He slowly manifested India's eternal spirit and became vaguely conscious of his mission in life.

For the protection of the righteous
and the destruction of the wicked,
and for the establishment of religion,
I come into being from age to age.¹

As the years rolled on, his mission as an Incarnation became clear to him and to all with whom he

came in contact. Some of those with deep insight recognized his spiritual greatness.

In India God is worshipped in many forms, such as, Shiva, Kali and Krishna. Though they appear separate they are not really separate. God is worshipped with form by the finite human mind. It is natural for the mind to seek a humanized aspect of God and to establish a relationship with Him. Through prayer and meditation the human aspect is transcended and form leads to the formless. Then, the word becomes silence.

Shiva stands for the Absolute, without vibration, without action. He is the symbol of calmness and silence. Kali, on the other hand, is action. She is the creator, the divine power. She is dynamic while Shiva is calm. Kali represents the turbulent waves, while Shiva symbolizes the calm ocean below the surface. Still, there is no difference between the ocean and its waves. Krishna, on the other hand, is the symbol of love. He is the binding tie of souls in this world through natural attraction. He's the symbol of great synthesis, accepting all and rejecting none. Kali acts as the central mistress of the divine household; she is the Divine Mother. Sri Ramakrishna addressed her as "My Mother". There existed between them the sweetest relationship throughout life. He gave up His body while chanting Her name.

In this Kali temple, he was a priest and performed formal worship, where devotion is expressed through ceremonies. The offering of flowers, light, food, drink...all this was done with an attitude of devotion. While performing these devotions, supreme love and a yearning for communion with God manifested. Sri Ramakrishna saw behind the stone image the Divine Spirit who is the giver of immortality, Satchidananda. Years of continuous worship intensified his yearning for the Mother's vision. He began meditating in the thick cluster of trees known as the Panchavati. This yearning grew to an indescribable intensity, which he attained not through emotionalism but through his spiritual disciplines. Late at night he would go to a low caste family's house and sweep the floor with his long hair so that he might learn the true meaning of humility. He wanted to efface all sense of ego. Purity became the breath of his life. Food and sleep which form indispensable parts of daily life were completely forgotten. His constant thought was for the Divine Mother's vision. His yearning for the ocean of bliss kept him in a God-intoxicated state. He wanted to see God with eyes open in everything and everywhere. He received various supplementary experiences, such as light and images of gods and goddesses. Individuals visiting the temple considered him to be mad. His life and conduct became different from others. Mathur Babu, who was the caretaker of the temple, thought that if Sri Ramakrishna were to marry, all would be set right. He was thus married to Sri Sarada Devi, who had prayed all along that God would remove all defects from her life.

On moonlit nights I would look at the
moon and pray with folded hands, "May
my heart be as pure as the rays of
yonder moon!" or "O Lord, there is a
stain even in the moon, but let there
not be the least trace of stain in my mind!"²

When meeting at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna asked her, "Well, my dear, have you come to drag me down to the worldly level?"³ She on the contrary became his disciple and companion. One day while serving him she asked, "How do you look upon me?" His answer was the most vivid example

of spiritual love.

The Mother who is the Deity in the temple, the mother who gave birth to me and now resides in the Nahabat—even she is now massaging my feet. I look upon you in that light—as the embodiment of Motherhood.⁴

He went through spiritual disciplines under the guidance of such suitable teachers as Totapuri and Bhairavi Brahmani. He would ask his teacher if he was actually mad. To his comfort they initiated him into the mysteries of God, both personal and impersonal. Totapuri, an outstanding monk, who had already experienced Nirvikalpa Samadhi (oneness with the Cosmic Consciousness), taught him the impersonal aspect of God. He was able to transcend time, space, causation, attributes and names. Sri Ramakrishna's life became India's laboratory. The knowledge of spiritual experiences from the personal God to the impersonal Brahman has been India's mission to the world. These visions, beyond understanding, are at the same time found in spiritual life. They made him a world teacher with the greatest wisdom and power to awaken the sleeping soul, bringing the soul back to its spiritual consciousness.

His appetite for the Hindu forms being completely satisfied, he turned to the paths of different religions. He followed the disciplines of Islam and repeated Allah's name giving up all Hindu prayers and temple visits. He finally received a vision of Mohammed, the prophet, who merged into him. He followed then the path of Christianity, and in 1874 the teachings of the Bible were explained to him. He saw a picture of the Madonna and Child and for three days was absorbed in Christ. He had a vision where Christ came and entered into him. On seeing the presence of this foreigner he heard a voice within his heart say, “Jesus the Christ, the great Yogi, the loving Son of God, one with the Father, who gave his heart's blood and put up with endless tortures in order to deliver men from sorrow and misery!”⁵ The Son of Mary embraced the Son of the Divine Mother and merged into Him. He was then convinced of God's incarnation as Christ, but not that Christ was the only incarnation.

The period of his spiritual disciplines was over, bringing on an inner calmness. Everything had been verified for him through visions. All his doubts were resolved.

When all the knots of the heart are destroyed, even while a man is alive, then a mortal becomes immortal. This much alone is the instruction (of all the Upanishads).⁶

The mad priest had been transformed into a teacher. He became a Prophet of Harmony. He was the first teacher to practise different religions and to proclaim that all paths lead to the same goal.

God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by bamboo steps or

by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole.

You may say that there are many errors and superstitions in another religion. I should reply: Suppose there are. Every religion has errors. Everyone thinks that his watch alone gives the correct time. It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him. Don't you know that God is the Inner Guide? He sees the longing of our heart and the yearning of our soul.⁷

This was a great message for our time, the summary of his spiritual experiences. He became convinced that he was an Incarnation of God and specially commissioned to give the message of his spiritual experiences for the benefit of the world. He had realized all phases of spirituality in a few years. He had always been a free soul, but his spiritual disciplines were needed to set an example for others. He also showed that all religions were authentic paths suited to different temperaments. Different experiences were like different phases in man's progress towards God.

Once Rama asked Hanuman, 'How do you look on Me?' And Hanuman replied: 'O Rama, as long as I have the feeling of "I", I see that Thou art the whole and I am a part; Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant. But when, O Rama, I have the knowledge of Truth, then I realize that Thou art I, and I am Thou.'⁸

For the present age Sri Ramakrishna was an "Awakener of Souls." Those who longed for God came to him, and their spiritual desire was easily and quickly fulfilled.

What do we learn from his life? A man can be perfect in this very life. He had love for all. There was no word of condemnation which escaped from his lips. The first part of his life he devoted to the acquisition of spirituality. The second part was his distribution of it. To him religion was being and becoming. Religious experience was something which could be given and taken. Both teacher and student must be qualified, then only can the grace of God work. His grace is always flowing; it is we who must unfurl our sails. Religion is the complete mastery of spirit over matter. The teacher must be the embodiment of renunciation. Religions are complementary and not contradictory. Religion is the manifestation of that divinity already in the human being. Sri Ramakrishna's life and teaching enables human beings to see God in humanity.

Sri Ramakrishna—How He Taught His Disciples

Sri Ramakrishna, in the modern age, is a great spiritual teacher. Not limited by geographical boundaries, he is a teacher of the whole world. His teaching is so universal that it is applicable to every human being. Such a teacher comes only once in a while in the eternal time. He had received the command from God and spoke with authority. Though he disliked being referred to as Guru or teacher, he fulfilled all the conditions for being a teacher to all. He was “Shrotriya” of the Vivekachudamani: “Who is versed in the Vedas, sinless, unsmitten by desire and a knower of Brahman...”¹ He was like butter extracted from milk after churning. He included in himself the widest range of spiritual experience. In his spiritual practice he manifested the broadest relationship with God, from the personal with form to the impersonal “Tat Tvam Asi.” He remained in the highest state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi for six months. He was completely free from any trace of ego at that time, as if the body was being kept by some other person. The ego was completely burned out by the fire of knowledge. He had no motive behind his teaching except the welfare of all. In instructing his disciples he would give them warnings not to accept any teacher unless he was thoroughly tested, day and night, just as a money changer tests coins. He would say never trust a teacher who teaches for money, power, or personal advantages. His complete conquest of lust and greed was a hallmark left by him to form an eternal standard for all. At the same time he never turned away a person. Even while lying on his sick bed, he would teach all who came to him.

After his spiritual practices were over, it was revealed to him that a group of young people would begin coming to him for instructions in spiritual life. Naturally, he was eager and excited to see them. From the roof top he would cry out for them saying, “Oh, where are you all? Come here! I am dying to see you!”² Even a mother would not feel such agony to see her children suffering as he felt being separated from his future disciples. Soon after, they began coming one by one, like bees attracted to the blossom of a flower in spring. He neither advertised nor gave public lectures, still they came. His was a silent attraction of the spirit by the spirit.

Various types of devotees with various degrees of development and capacity came to him. Some could clearly see in him the divine God himself. Some came to learn religious life from him, some to spend time in his holy company. Some were householders and some were to become future monks. Others were highly qualified through an English education—a variety of devotees with a variety of motives. Then there was the small group who came to him without any motive. They only loved him. He was there to distribute nectar to the parched throats in this world.

There came to him some individuals who had the desire to follow the life of austere monks. Such spiritual aspirants, in Hindu tradition, take up rigorous disciplines which are uncompromising in content. They lead the life of a wandering monk, not remaining in one place more than three days and

nights. They beg their food without a pot in hand, only their two hands which turn into containers. They spend their time in discussing scriptures and spiritual matters. Sri Ramakrishna shared with them his spiritual experiences, which enriched and helped them in their spiritual practices. They carried with them his message and teachings. Thousands of them, in the passage of time, have formed the unseen pillars of Hinduism.

There came another group of devotees who had been inspired by such leaders as Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen and others, who were the followers of the Brahmo Samaj. The Brahmo Samaj was a liberal religious movement, which was the product of English influence on the age old Hindu tradition. They were inclined to oppose rituals and image worship. They didn't approve of Sri Ramakrishna's spirit of renunciation of lust and greed. Their program was based on social reform, in which Sri Ramakrishna had little interest. Still, he liked their spirit of sincerity, and they liked his spirit of simplicity, his childlike nature. There developed a sincere devotion and friendship between him and the members of the Brahmo Samaj. Sri Ramakrishna would visit them and their places of worship and join them in their devotional singing. At these times he would enter into deep Samadhi. He would ask them to cultivate a deep intimacy with God. He would ask the Divine Mother why he was brought to them when they were not prepared to accept the Divine Mother Herself. Their leader, Keshab Sen, was a great leader, and Sri Ramakrishna developed a genuine love toward him. Sri Ramakrishna learned from them the outlook of Westernized Indians. Many of Sri Ramakrishna's most intimate disciples came from this stock. His devotees fell into certain broad categories:

HOUSEHOLDERS

This was a group of married people with families, who generally came from the middle class, small income group with many responsibilities on their shoulders. They were afflicted by troubles and problems. In order to get some relief and comfort, they would come to visit him in the garden of Dakshineswar. He, in return, would pay visits to their houses. He would advise them to worship a personal God, following the disciplines of devotion. They were taught the path of Bhakti.

The path of renunciation with the ideal of a higher experience was taught to another set of devotees, which he was preparing for renunciation. He would tell the householders that they were fighting a battle from within a fort and recommended that they lead a life of dedication with regular prayer, joy, holy company and solitude, but not total renunciation. To illustrate his point he would give the examples of the mudfish, which lives in the mud but is not contaminated by it, and the maid servant, who carries out her duties while her mind is always with her real family. They were taught in stages, slowly, the principles of self-control. He would tell them to have only one or two children and then to live together as brother and sister rather than husband and wife. He would advise them to look after their family with one hand and to keep the other hand on God. He would ask some of them to spend the night with him in his room at Dakshineswar, and some he would visit at home. One of these was Mahendranath Gupta, the great writer of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Girish Chandra Ghosh, the dramatist and actor, was another. He was not asked by Sri Ramakrishna to give up the theatre, yet he was completely converted from all bad habits and addictions. Girish gradually understood the true meaning of life and ultimately lived the life of a monk.

FUTURE MONKS

These boys were in a class by themselves. They followed an austere path of renunciation, both inner and outer. They took the vow of celibacy and chastity. They had a different training from Sri Ramakrishna, one of full and complete renunciation and austerity. Householders cannot be good spiritual teachers for they will indulge in too many words and vain talks. They have a tendency to compromise with the world. These young boys were different. Some of them were “Nitya Siddha”, ever free from the bondage of the world, “Isvarakoti”, who had realized God. They were earmarked for his work. He recognized them instantly.

One such young man, who was their future leader, was Narendranath. He was later known to the world as Swami Vivekananda. Sri Ramakrishna had a vision of Naren before their first meeting. His first sentence to Naren was, “Is it proper that you should come so late?”³ There developed an outstanding relationship of spiritual love between the two. Naren had a Western education and had come in contact with Western manners and customs through philosophy and literature. He laughed at Sri Ramakrishna's visions and ridiculed all images. Sri Ramakrishna, on the other hand, did not suppress Naren's intellectual understanding, but when intellect failed, he would touch Naren and give him a spiritual insight. He kept a sharp eye on Naren's purity and moral discipline. Sri Ramakrishna had the unusual capacity to detect the inner workings of Naren. Sri Ramakrishna was so pure, yet he was able to eat the food prepared by Naren. He would test Naren from time to time. Sometimes he would stop talking to Naren, another time he offered him psychic powers; all this was done to test him. Ultimately Sri Ramakrishna transmitted to Naren all his spiritual powers before giving up the body. He asked Naren to become a leader and guide to these young men who were to become monastic disciples.

Rakhal, who later became Swami Brahmananda, was second to Naren and was recognized by all in the Order as Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual son. Sri Ramakrishna had a vision of Rakhal as a child and cowherd boy, recognizing him to be the companion of Sri Krishna. Rakhal, too, recognized in Sri Ramakrishna father and mother both. He was gentle by nature and was married and had a son. Later he renounced all and became a monk and the President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Yogin, later Swami Yogananda, was a part of the inner circle. He had a great spiritual eagerness right from his childhood. Against his will he was married and became frustrated in the situation. Sri Ramakrishna told Yogin to bring his wife to see him. After their meeting, Sri Ramakrishna comforted him by saying she was not a danger but a helpmate. He trained Yogin in practical life. His one teaching on the harmony between practical life and renunciation was outstanding. He would say, “You should no doubt be a devotee, but not a fool on that account.”⁴ To Nityaniranjan, who later became Swami Niranjanananda, he would give different advice. Sarat and Sashi, the future pillars of the mission, Swami Saradananda and Swami Ramakrishnananda, were recognized as comparable to the apostles of Christ.

With these youngsters he had a special relationship with great fun and merriment. At the same time, he watched and gave implicit guidance on their food, way of living and company. He would instruct them to spend long hours in meditation. In his company they never felt any hardships but discovered it to be a great austerity, for in his presence they had to control all worldly thoughts. These youngsters later became the pillars, monks, and apostles of the future Ramakrishna Order.

WOMEN DEVOTEES

Sri Ramakrishna also accepted and trained women devotees. He had a special relationship with them. The traditional monastic idea was to shun women. They were considered in bygone ages as tempters, a legacy of Eve's tradition. Buddha at first refused a monk's life to his wife. Sri Ramakrishna, on the other hand, followed an altogether different technique. He gave the Ramakrishna Order the insight that all women were the manifestations of the Divine Mother. Monks were to look upon women from that point of view, which is the purest of all relationships. He scolded Hari, who later became Swami Turiyananda, for avoiding women and shunning their company. Sri Ramakrishna himself possessed a womanly grace. He spoke of a vision he had received in which he would manifest himself in the future as a Hindu widow devoted to the worship of Sri Krishna. Despite his admiration for women, he still would not allow any of them to be intimately connected with him. He would advise women devotees to visit the temple and spend their time in deep devotion, addressing them all as "Mother." They, in return, recognized him as a child, innocent and guileless. He was their great confidant. He drew out their best and finest qualities and had the unusual capacity to transform them to the highest states of consciousness.

THE HOLY MOTHER

Here was the greatest among all women disciples. She was earmarked for him and his mission. Even with an age difference of seventeen years, they were married. Holy Mother first visited him at the age of 10–12 years. She felt as if a pitcher of bliss had been set in her heart. Meeting with him later at Dakshineswar, she became his disciple and nurse. It was an entirely spiritual relationship between them. After Sri Ramakrishna gave up his body, Holy Mother wept, saying that she had lost her Mother Kali. The state of her consciousness, the highest, becomes too difficult for ordinary beings to understand. By their example, it was illustrated that a man and a woman can dwell on a spiritual plane and attain realization, which is the highest peace and joy in life.

RANI RASMANI

She was the next among his women devotees. She was a wealthy woman and applied all her wealth to support his spiritual practices and the application of their spiritual fruits in uplifting men and women in the garden of Dakshineswar. She was much older in age, but one day Sri Ramakrishna slapped her in the Kali Temple because of her lowered thoughts. She understood his action and acknowledged him as a teacher and instructor. Other outstanding women devotees were Yogin Ma, Golap Ma, and Gauri Ma.

Sri Ramakrishna's method of teaching was unique. He had no trace of ego when he taught his disciples. He could not bear or accept being referred to as a teacher. His was a method of silent transmission. He never disturbed anyone's faith, but removed any obstacles from their path. He was an expert gardener who removed all the weeds to allow the water of life to reach the roots. To all his disciples he was a friend, companion, playmate. Still he never allowed them to forget their ideal of God-consciousness. After his passing, the householders lived an unattached life almost on the verge of renunciation and the monks joined together and organized themselves, following the lead of Swami Vivekananda, into the Ramakrishna Math and Mission with the twin ideals of realization and service.

Holy Mother—Sri Sarada Devi

Throughout India's history, from Vedic times until the present day, women have been looked upon as manifestations of the Divine, and a supreme place has been allotted to them in religious and social life. Different roles have been played by women in India and the West. Therefore, we have two different standards for judging their respective positions. We should not judge Indian women by Western standards or Western women by Indian standards. It is a matter of historic evolution, the result of economic, political and religious influences. When we speak under these aspects, no criticism is meant of either Western women or Indian women. We have seen in both spheres their nobility, heroism and sacrifices.

While the Indian people respect and honour woman as the wife, she is a mother first and last. In the West, the ideal of womanhood is centered on being a wife. In the West, a man marries a woman and goes away with the wife. The wife rules the home, and the mother's role is subordinate to the wife's role. In the Hindu home, the mother rules. In the West, women like to be romanced, but Hindu women love peace, calmness and tranquillity. In the West, women often feel insecurity and tension; the Hindu woman has security and assurance. In India, every woman is addressed as “Mother”. Motherhood is associated with unselfishness, sacrifice and self-abnegation. The mother prays and fasts before the child is born. She visits temples and reads scriptures, preparing a smooth entrance for her child. In the household, parental influence is considered most important. What can be expected from children who are born because it could not be helped? Hindu women are generally calm and unobtrusive, modest, patient, and forgiving. To a Western observer, a Hindu woman appears passive and lacking in dynamism. This observation is not true. Women in India love freedom, though their concept of freedom is different. They are not free to break their marriage ties or desert their children. She is satisfied when given freedom to manage the household and look after her children and relatives. A married woman is referred to as “Sahadharmini”. She assumes many responsibilities in the family and shoulders many different duties. Above all, she practises spiritual disciplines without any external interference. Behind her calmness, there is an immense strength, and this strength is shown whenever and wherever the situation demands. She has played her part on the battlefield, as a Queen, and as a religious teacher.

During the middle ages, because of external aggression, her freedom was suppressed. As a consequence, India lost its freedom. Now, her freedom has been regained, and women are playing a part in all phases of human activity. They are ministers, governors and legislators, both in the federal government and the state government. They are secular teachers, as well as, spiritual teachers. Thus, in Hindu society, women are not inferior by any standard. Human nature is not complete without woman. God is described in the scriptures as half man and half woman.

Swami Vivekananda stated that Sri Ramakrishna presented Holy Mother as the ideal of Indian

womanhood. She was a great spiritual teacher, although she did not lecture or write a book or appear in public. “Ever covered with modesty's garment,”¹ she played the role of Sri Ramakrishna's wife, but in playing this role, she was always a nun and disciple first. She was the spiritual successor of Sri Ramakrishna, but she never made any special claim for herself, though the topmost honour and respect was conferred on her by one and all. She lived in seclusion and silence, looking after the spiritual needs of disciples and the physical needs of her blood relations. She was the sole guardian of an eccentric niece, and her whole life was that of stillness and prayer and a loving devotion to duties. She is an extraordinary mother in that she cared for everyone, although she had no children of her own.

Even in childhood, she was a serious-minded girl. She was a peacemaker, helped her parents with the household chores, and listened to the simple stories of the Hindu epics. Her name was Sarada, the goddess of learning. Her future partner in life, Sri Ramakrishna, was in a God-intoxicated state after his first vision of the Divine Mother, and people thought that he was actually insane. In order to bring his mind back down to the things of the world, they suggested marriage to him. Surprisingly, he readily agreed and even indicated his future bride. He was then twenty-three and she was only five. It was a betrothal of spiritual companionship. At the age of fourteen, a unique relationship developed between Sri Ramakrishna and Sarada. He showed great love for her, but of a different kind. He gave her spiritual instruction and also showed her practical things, like how to trim the lamp in the worship room, how to travel in a train, and, especially, how to adjust herself to different circumstances. When he returned to Dakshineswar, she stayed at home and lived a quiet life, filled with prayer and meditation. She always awaited the call of her husband to render him service. When she heard the report of her husband's illness, she went on foot a distance of sixty miles to get first-hand knowledge of his condition. During their meeting at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna stated that he was always at her service. From that time she lived near him for the next thirteen years and nursed and attended on him. She was an intimate witness of his life as a spiritual teacher.

A unique relationship developed between them as they lived together in the same room. He remained true to his monastic vows, but there was no lack of love between them. Once, as Holy Mother was massaging Sri Ramakrishna's feet, she asked him what he thought of her, and he replied, “The Mother who is the Deity in the temple, the mother who gave birth to me and now resides in the Nahabat—even she is now massaging my feet. I look upon you in that light—as the embodiment of Motherhood.”² She was his peer in every respect. She was the embodiment of purity.

To Her whose character is
pure, Whose life is also
pure, the Embodiment of
purity, I offer repeated
salutations.³

Their story is unbelievable in our age, when sensuality is considered the normal behaviour. The culmination of their relationship came when she was literally worshipped by Sri Ramakrishna as the embodiment of the Divine Mother. In that act, he demonstrated a complete control over his lower nature and a completely new attitude towards womanhood. Religious mystics in the past had shunned woman as an obstacle to spiritual life. We see it in the utterances and behaviour of Jesus and Buddha. Yet, Sri Ramakrishna saw the presence of God in her. To Him marriage was a spiritual discipline.

The entire relationship can be sublimated, and husband and wife can actually become spiritual partners.

Sri Ramakrishna died of cancer in 1886. After this event, Sarada Devi lived a life of spiritual discipline, meditation and austerity. She performed the Panchatapa or “Five-Fire Ceremony.” As an outcome, she had many visions which ended in samadhi. She would not, without reluctance, reenter the body. During her pilgrimage to Vrindavan, she prayed that she might not see anybody's faults. This prayer was fulfilled. Once, when she was criticized for overlooking the fault of a maidservant, she replied, “Well, there is no dearth of people who see others’ faults. The world will not come to a standstill if I act otherwise. I am differently constituted.”⁴

Bees come of their own accord when flowers blossom. She became a teacher, and her spiritual family covered the whole world, and she was a mother to them all. She prayed and meditated at night for their welfare. She suffered physically from the touch of worldly people, but when someone tried to stop them from touching her, she only remarked that she was not here on earth to eat candies. She continued on, saying that Sri Ramakrishna had left her behind to manifest the motherhood of God. She did not forget her blood relatives either. Her brothers were greedy and quarrelsome, still she was a mother to them all. They asked her for material wealth and received it. She had an eccentric niece who subjected her to endless torture. She called her “My Maya” and demonstrated forbearance beyond words. Such an example the world has not seen. With just a little inconvenience, we become angry and lose our tempers.

She became seriously ill in 1919 and lost interest in the world. Slowly, she began to withdraw, giving indications to her chief attendant, Swami Saradananda, that she was ready to leave the body. Her last words were, “If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others, but find fault rather with yourself. Learn to make the world your own. Nobody is a stranger, the world is yours.”⁵

What do we learn from her life? Although she was preoccupied with various duties, she was not defiled in the least by the foul breath of the world. She was a blazing fire of spirituality but concealed it from others through wonderful self-control. Gauri Ma, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, used to say, “a fraction of such experience and we bubble over.” She was a living example of detachment, though living an apparently worldly life. Her life was a living service to all, regardless of colour, caste or creed. She was the embodiment of patience, forbearance, and duty. Though she could have lived in the comforts of Calcutta, she preferred to live in an unhealthy village surrounded by greedy relatives. She was a perfect example of that Motherhood, which exalts all women's lives. By counting such a woman as one of them, not just India but the whole world has become blessed. Through her, all womanhood has become sanctified.

Swami Vivekananda's Message to the Modern World

Swami Vivekananda was born with a mission. He was not an ordinary saint, who attained liberation through spiritual discipline. Sri Ramakrishna called him, Nitya Siddha—Ever Perfect. He said of him:

One day I saw that, through samadhi, my mind was going up by a luminous path. Going beyond the gross world studded with the sun, the moon and the stars, it entered first of all into the subtle world of ideas. The more it began to ascend to subtler and subtler strata of that realm, the more did I see beautiful ideal forms of deities existing on both sides of the path. It came gradually to the last extremity of that region. I saw a barrier of light there separating the realm of the divisible from that of the indivisible. I saw that there was no more any person or thing there having a form. As if afraid to enter there, even the gods and goddesses possessing heavenly bodies exercised their authority only over realms far below. But the very next moment I saw seven wise Rishis having bodies consisting of divine light only, seated there in Samadhi. I felt that in virtue and knowledge, love and renunciation, they had excelled even the gods and goddesses, not to speak of human beings. Astonished, I was pondering over their greatness when I saw before me that a part of the homogenous mass of light of the “Abode of the Indivisible”, devoid on the slightest tinge of difference, became solidified and converted into the form of a Divine Child.

Coming down to one of those Rishis, and throwing its soft and delicate arms round his neck, the Divine Child embraced him, and afterwards calling him with its ambrosial words, sweeter than the music of the Vina, made great efforts to wake him up from his Samadhi. The Rishi woke up at the delicate and loving touch and looked on at that wonderful Child with half-shut eyes, free from winking. Seeing his bright face, full of delight at the sight of the Child, I thought that the Child was the treasure of his heart, and that their familiarity was a matter of eternity. The extraordinary Divine Child then expressed infinite joy and said to him, "I am going, you must come with me!" The Rishi said nothing at that request, but his loving eyes expressed his hearty assent. Afterwards, looking on the Child with loving eyes, he entered again into Samadhi. Astonished, I then saw that a part of the mind and body of that Rishi, converted into the form of a bright light, came down to earth along the reverse path. Hardly had I seen Narendra for the first time when I knew that he was the Rishi.¹

Sri Ramakrishna is revered today as a prophet or incarnation, born to fulfil a cosmic purpose. His main purpose was to free religion from the crust of superstition. In this mission, he brought Swami Vivekananda as his instrument to interpret the true ideas about religion and spread them near and far. Swami Vivekananda was to Sri Ramakrishna as St. Paul was to Christ and Ananda to Buddha. A Prophet is too spiritual to face the rough and tumble of life. He requires a sturdy instrument to face all types of people, both educated and uneducated, and Swami Vivekananda was that instrument.

The nineteenth century had gone through a profound change in human thinking, out of which came a great reaction against religious beliefs. This was mainly created by science and technology. The pre-scientific age was an age of faith, where people believed in the extra-cosmic existence of God. Religion, then, consisted of dogmas and creeds, and no freedom was given to reason, except within the framework of revelations. Salvation was only possible for the believers. People were satisfied with the articles of faith which had been revealed to them through scriptures for the last fifteen hundred years. This act of faith influenced the culture of pre-scientific Europe, and this attitude extended into almost all areas of human thinking and action. This included philosophy, architecture, music, painting and politics. All eyes turned to Rome, the "City of God", which was the centre of the Christian world. Saints and philosophers like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Anselm

were all great inspirations for the Christian world during the middle ages. Dante, through his poetry, gave something to pin faith on. The Sermon on the Mount, the New Testament, the Gothic Cathedrals; all served in the building of the church and the body of Christ. All thought moved in the framework of their creation. Any other thought was looked upon as heresy. This was the picture of Europe and the New World until the Renaissance.

The advent of science changed the picture gradually but totally. The test of reality changed from faith to experience and reason. No private truth was admitted. The City of God was replaced by the City of Man. It became the common heritage of mankind. More emphasis was placed on suffering than sin. Religion was changed into humanism. Heaven became a perfect society on earth, without pain or suffering. The Renaissance ushered in education, transportation, and medicine as the means of genuine progress. Science and technology created material prosperity and a secular culture in Europe. Democracy was accepted as a form of government, admitting the equality of human beings. Gradually, it brought a transition from the divine right of kings to equal rights. It preached comforts and convenience for all. The logical conclusion of this trend was Karl Marx and communism. It was the product of Western science and culture. It soon proved to be a devouring monster and challenged every aspect of culture. It became almost a religion, with its rituals and dogmas. It taught a definite way of life; the problem was how to convert it. It could not be silenced by machinery or guns but only with another philosophy, more dynamic and satisfying to the common man. Swami Vivekananda gave such a philosophy and religion.

Swami Vivekananda gave this philosophy and spiritual message in Chicago in 1893. The city of Chicago stood for progress and science. At the World Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda gave a new interpretation of religion. It was humanistic, rational, broad and ethical, without losing the basic profoundness. It was satisfying to the head and heart, reason and faith. Although he was only twenty-nine years old, he was fully qualified to give this philosophy. He was both young and old. He was endowed with both the knowledge of the West and the wisdom of the East. He had the insight of the spiritual heritage of India through his deep contact with Sri Ramakrishna, and above all, he had a great heart filled with love for all. This is what ultimately counts, when you can feel such love for every individual soul.

Let us recount the milestones in the life of Swami Vivekananda. He was born in January 1863, five years after Darwin wrote his book, *The Origin of Species*. *The Origin of Species* was one great factor in shaping the modern Western culture. It affected all human institutions, and the thinking men of science, politics and society. The Biblical idea of creation was replaced by the theory of evolution. Natural selection, the struggle for existence and the mechanistic struggle of man to conquer the universe became the basis of all thought. The atheist regarded evolution as a God-send.

India became part of the British empire in 1857, and English education was introduced. There was a chaotic condition in the social structure because of this. Religion was at its lowest ebb. Priestcraft became rampant, which led to the exploitation of the masses. The English-educated Indians felt that the Hindu religion was responsible for India's backwardness. It was like new wine in old bottles. There was also a reaction from the orthodox Hindu society.

Swami Vivekananda was brought up in the atmosphere of an intelligent and agnostic society. His mother, on the other hand, was a devout Hindu, and Swamiji spent his boyhood under her guidance.

He spent much time in meditation and prayer and had a passion for chastity and truthfulness.

When he was about four or five years old, he used to buy in the market small images of Sita, Rama, Siva and other gods and goddesses. Bringing them home, he would adorn them with ornaments and sit motionless in front of them with closed eyes in imitation of meditation. He would, however, open his eyes now and then to see if, in the meantime, any matted hair, hanging from his head, had entered the earth like the aerial roots of some trees. For, he had heard from the old ladies of the household that Munis and Rishis sat in meditation for such a long time that their matted hair grew long, came down and entered the earth in that way.²

His deep-seated spiritual fervour and search to find the truth could not be suppressed by any external means. Even in childhood, he used to have visions:

I used to see all my life a wonderful point of light between my eyebrows, as soon as I shut my eyes in order to go to sleep, and I used to observe attentively its various changes. So that it might be convenient to see it, I used to lie on my bed in the way people bow down touching the ground with their foreheads. The extraordinary point kept changing its colours and increasing in size, became gradually converted into the form of a ball, and bursting at last, covered my body from head to foot with white liquid light. As soon as that happened, I lost consciousness and fell asleep.³

In college he studied Western philosophy, which shattered his boyish faith in God. Because of this an inner discontent developed. He would not rest, he wanted only a direct experience of God. He would ask all with whom he came into contact, "Have you seen God?" He also asked his teacher, Professor Hastie, and to Narendra's great surprise, Professor Hastie directed him to see the saint, Sri Ramakrishna, at Dakshineswar. Swami Vivekananda went to Dakshineswar and was surprised when

Sri Ramakrishna said, "Why are you so late?" Sri Ramakrishna recognized Swami Vivekananda as his spiritual messenger. Swami Vivekananda was perplexed but suspended his judgement. He admired the honesty and the God-consciousness of Sri Ramakrishna, which was enhanced by purity and love far above the ordinary kind. He accepted Sri Ramakrishna as his teacher. Under his guidance, he practised spiritual disciplines and had many spiritual experiences, which ultimately ended in Nirvikalpa Samadhi, unlimited God-consciousness. Before Sri Ramakrishna gave up his body he prophesized that Swami Vivekananda would become a world teacher. Swami Vivekananda took the vow of monastic life with the twin ideals of "realization of the Self and the service of all beings." He wandered throughout India as a monk and practised an austere life and lived like a recluse. He never stayed in one place more than three days and three nights. Sri Ramakrishna appeared to him in a vision and admonished him, saying, "Why are you so anxious to see God with eyes closed, can't you see him with eyes opened?"

In Swamiji's wanderings, he discovered the secret of India's greatness and came to the conclusion that India's inner strength was based on spiritual life. Renunciation and service were the two methods by which spiritual life manifests itself. By deepening these two qualities in individuals and society, greatness is achieved, success is gained and fulfilment follows. Greed, lust for power and the desire for domination brought about the poverty of the masses. Society was crushed by the poverty and the ignorance of the people, who were being exploited by the priests and the rich class. Swamiji's message of renunciation and service would rejuvenate the masses with the help of science and technology. With the guidance and vision of Sri Ramakrishna, he decided to go to America to participate in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. His message was both national and international and was not based on a narrow patriotism.

India and America represented two methods. Like two wings of a bird, they were both necessary and complimentary. Science was meant to discover the inner truth, represented by religion, and all religion had to be scientific and rational. The spiritual needed to use the power released by science and technology for the improvement of material conditions. East and West needed each other. Without this meeting and coming together, no problems could be solved.

One atom in this universe cannot move without dragging the whole world along with it. There cannot be any progress without the whole world following in the wake, and it is becoming every day clearer that the solution of any problem can never be attained on racial, or national, or narrow grounds. Every idea has to become broad till it covers the whole of this world, every aspiration must go on increasing till it has engulfed the whole of humanity, nay, the whole of life, within its scope.⁴

This message of the harmony of religion and science, which he had realized through his own spiritual genius, he gave before the assembly on the platform of the Parliament of Religions. He

received a spontaneous ovation from all. The fact that Swami Vivekananda's spiritual power was quickly recognized shows the inner spiritual qualities of the American people and the American heritage. This heritage was reflected by the pilgrim fathers, who migrated from Europe to the New World for freedom of worship and the Bill of Rights. This was the spirit of Lincoln, who respected the divinity of the human soul, which had been given expression by deep-thinking men, such as Emerson and the Transcendentalist Movement. This unity, which is the main theme of his message for the East and West is still working in America today. The present discord is only a passing phase.

Swami Vivekananda gave his message through lectures, classes, interviews, and books. After building a bridge between East and West through these means, he returned to India. As a result of his success in America, he received tremendous recognition when he returned to India. He was, as it were, a gift from America to India. The Ramakrishna Mission was formed under his guidance and inspiration. His message is based on these Vedic ideas: the divinity of the soul and the unity of existence.

By the divinity of the soul he meant that man has descended from God and is the child of God. Each soul is potentially divine. Man is not a sinner; his true nature is covered by ignorance. The goal is to manifest that divinity. Then alone will greed, passion, meanness, lust, and so forth disappear—when the sleeping spirit is awakened. Swami Vivekananda laid emphasis on telling a man what his real nature was and not what it appeared to be. Communism emphasized that man was like a bee in a hive with no freedom. He must sacrifice all for the state. This has resulted in a secular culture; it has created much tension and fear. It can be remedied by giving a divine interpretation of the universe based on the unity of existence. There is only one existence. The universe is pure spirit; one and non-dual. Through our senses it appears as matter; through the mind, it appears as idea; through the spirit, it appears as spirit.

What, indeed, is here is there; what is there is here likewise. He who sees as though there is difference here, goes from death to death.⁵

One should be able to see unity behind diversity. We belong to that one Spirit just as the waves belong to the ocean, the sparks belong to the flame. Peace and fearlessness will be realized by unity; only fear comes through diversity. The unnecessary emphasis on the multiplicity of the world creates selfishness, wars, friction, and suffering. Unity is the basis of ethics in human relationships. The same standard should be applied to all. Jesus tells us, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This includes all beings: man, woman, and subhuman. There should be no double standard. The same standard should be in economics and religion, creating a unity of purpose.

The message of the World Parliament of Religions is that there is one Reality which is called by many names. That same Reality is addressed in all religions by different names.

May the Lord of the universe, the remover of evil, whom the devotees of Shiva worship as Shiva, the Vedantins as Brahman, the Buddhists as Buddha, the followers of the

Nyaya Philosophy who are clever in logic as the Agent, those devoted to the Jaina doctrines as Arhat, the ritualists of the Mimamsa school as Karma—grant us all our heart's desires.⁶

Whatever being there is glorious, prosperous or powerful, know that to have sprung but from a spark of My splendour.⁷

We are all free to select our own Chosen Ideal or Ishta Devata, which forms the particular path we should be devoted to, but at the same time, we should show reverence to all other paths and ideals. The teacher should not create doubt in the mind of the devotee. He should give the student a push forward from where he stands, at the same time teaching him to respect all other ideals. Freedom consists of releasing oneself from the idea of “I and Mine.” Egotism and passion are the great bondages of man, held together with the rope of ignorance. This rope can be burned with the fire of knowledge, here and now.

If one has realised here, then there is truth; if he has not realised here, then there is great destruction. The wise ones, having realised (Brahman) in all beings, and having turned away from this world, become immortal.⁸

The lower nature of man must be transformed into the higher nature and that should be manifested. The physical appearance of the man will remain the same, he will not grow two horns, but the thinking and understanding will change. He will become a beneficial and righteous agent for all humanity. This is the ideal of “Jivan Mukti”— complete freedom in this very life. It is a state of realization and not just a belief or blind faith. It is an actual experience. Swami Vivekananda came as a torch bearer and gave his message to the modern world. He brought the universal truth to all men and women. With this truth, people's minds are freed. We have to know how to apply the message in our daily life. People have to be kinder; justice must prevail; and human rights must be prized more than anything else. The Parliament of Religions has to be lived daily. There must be a greater, universal parliament, wherein each individual in the world lives in a spirit of communion and proper understanding. This is called the “Parliament of Man”, in which religion, science, philosophy, art, all human achievements will be represented. Men will recognize each other as fellow pilgrims to the shrine of truth. All human knowledge and efforts will be directed towards the sole purpose of bringing man to his potential divinity.

Swami Vivekananda gave his message in the Parliament of Religions in 1893. Our task is not over! A greater parliament has to be organized on the basis of human unity, in which all aspects of human action, thought, and achievement will be represented. There will be a union of all branches of human knowledge, including both science and religion. The forms of knowledge will be harnessed for one purpose alone, and that is to bring out man's hidden powers, his potential divinity. The whole world

is going in that direction. We should not stop until the goal is reached!

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