



Life of

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

HIS CHILDHOOD AND LIFE WITH THE MASTER

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA was born on January 21, 1863, at Sikra, a village near Calcutta, Bengal. His parents were Ananda Mohan Ghosh and Kailas Kamini. Kailas Kamini, his mother, was devoted to Krishna and she spent most of her time in prayer, worship and meditation. Maharaj was her only son. Being a devotee of Krishna, she named him Rakhal, 'the shepherd boy'. She passed away when Rakhal was five years old.

Rakhal liked being with other children and playing all kinds of games with them. He was especially fond of 'playing church'. He would mould a clay image of Mother Kali and worship Her with his playmates. During religious festivals in the temple of Mother Durga, which his ancestors had built, he would take his seat behind the priest. Sometimes, while watching

the worship, he would be filled with a fervour of devotion and become absorbed in the thought of Divine Mother.

Ananda Mohan loved gardening. As a child, Rakhal would work with his father, and learned gardening from him at an early age. He was always eager to catch big fish, and would sit patiently with his fishing rod for hours by the pond. We saw how, in later life, he never lost these two enthusiasms of his childhood—gardening and fishing.

From boyhood, he was a lover of music. He learned songs about Divine Mother and Krishna. He and his friends would retire into a mango grove and sing these songs together in chorus. In later years, he encouraged his disciples to sing devotional songs, and he would always have in his company a few who were expert musicians. Wherever he went, praises of the Lord would be sung.

When Rakhal had finished his studies at the village primary school, he came to Calcutta to begin grammar school. He was then twelve years old. Attached to this school was an athletic club, which interested Rakhal very much. The members of the club were young boys and Naren (later known as Vivekananda) was their leader. This was how Rakhal and

Naren met. They were of the same age and became very fond of each other. Later both boys became pupils at a gymnasium directed by one Mr. Guha.

At this period Keshab Chandra Sen was exercising a great influence over the youth of Bengal by his powerful oratory, his fervent devotion and his vast knowledge of Eastern and Western religions. He was the leader of the Brahmo Samaj movement. He preached the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. In his talks, he would quote the Upanishads and the Christian Bible ; his new line of approach revived an interest in religion amongst the educated classes of Bengal. The creed of the Brahmo Samaj preached that theistic conception of the Godhead which is the exclusive creed of Christianity and which is also to be found, among many other conceptions, in the Hindu scriptures. Keshab denounced as polytheism the Hindu cult of many gods and goddesses, although these are really aspects of the one Brahman. He was opposed to the worship of their images in the temples. Naren and Rakhal joined the movement and subscribed to its creed.

Rakhal used to spend most of his time in prayer and contemplation, neglecting his stu-

dies. "God is our Father, our very own. How shall I reach Him?" This was the only thought that occupied his mind. Sri Ramakrishna used later to say of him: "Rakhal was born with an intense love for God. Such a love is usually acquired only when a man has practised spiritual disciplines for many years, or many lives." Rakhal regularly attended the services of the Brahmo Samaj. His prayer that God might be revealed to him continued incessantly throughout the day like the act of breathing.

Rakhal reached his sixteenth birthday. He was not doing well at school. His father, worrying about the boy's future, thought that it must be the emotionalism of adolescence which turned his son's mind toward God and that this was the reason why he neglected his studies. If Rakhal got married, the father said to himself, his mind would be brought down to earth. He would have to consider taking up a career and providing for his wife, and therefore he would study harder. So he arranged for Rakhal's marriage to a young girl named Visweswari.

Keshab Chandra Sen was the first to preach publicly the greatness of Sri Ramakrishna. Devotees began to flock to the temple of Dak-

shineswar to visit the Master. Among them were Manomohan Mitra and Shyamasundari, the brother and mother of Visweswari. At the time of Rakhal's marriage, these two were already ardent devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, whom they regarded as an incarnation of Sri Chaitanya. Thus it came about that the worldly influence of marriage combined with the spiritual influence of Keshab to bring Rakhal to the feet of his future beloved Master.

It was natural that Manomohan should bring Rakhal, his new brother-in-law, and introduce him to Sri Ramakrishna. Some time before their visit, the Master had had spiritual visions concerning his future disciple. Once, Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother : "Mother, I want someone to be my constant companion. Bring me a boy who is pure-hearted and intensely devoted to You." A few days later he saw in his mystic vision a boy standing under the banyan tree in the temple grounds. On another occasion, this same boy appeared to him in a different manner. To quote the Master's own words : "A few days before Rakhal came to me, Mother placed a little boy on my lap and said : 'This is your son.' At first I was startled : 'My son ?' Mother smiled at this and made me under-

stand that I was not to have a son in the ordinary physical sense, but that this boy would be my spiritual son. He would live up to the highest ideal of renunciation."

From this hour onward, Sri Ramakrishna waited eagerly for the coming of his spiritual son. A few moments before Rakhal actually arrived, he had another vision. Suddenly he saw a lotus blooming with a hundred petals on the bosom of the Ganges. Each of its petals shone with exquisite loveliness. On the lotus, two boys were dancing with anklets on their feet. One of them was Sri Krishna himself. The other was the boy he had seen in his earlier vision. Their dance was indescribably beautiful. Every movement they made seemed to splash foam, as it were, from an ocean of sweetness. Sri Ramakrishna was lost in ecstasy.

Just then a boat arrived carrying Manomohan and Rakhal. Sri Ramakrishna looked at Rakhal with bewilderment. "What is this?" he thought to himself. "Here is the boy I saw standing under the banyan tree; here is the boy Mother placed on my lap; here is the boy I saw just now dancing on the lotus with Sri Krishna. This is the pure-hearted companion I prayed for to Mother."

Sri Ramakrishna regarded Rakhal for a few moments in silence. Then he smilingly remarked to Manomohan : "There are wonderful possibilities in this boy." After this, the Master talked to Rakhal for some time, as though he were an old friend.

"What is your name ?" he asked.

Rakhal answered : "Rakhal Chandra Ghosh."

Hearing the name 'Rakhal', Sri Ramakrishna was deeply excited, and muttered to himself : "Rakhal ! The shepherd boy of Brindaban—the playmate of Sri Krishna !"

Then, in a sweet affectionate voice, he said : "Come and see me again."

In the presence of the Master, Rakhal had experienced a peculiar feeling of joy, love and intense attraction. As he left the temple grounds, that voice in all its sweetness kept echoing within, his heart : "Come and see me again." Rakhal knew that at last he had met a man who had seen and known God.

Rakhal went back to his home and to school, but he could not forget his visit to the Master. Sri Ramakrishna filled all his thoughts, and he was impatient to see him again. A few days later, after school hours, he went alone to Dakshineswar. The Master welcomed him

eagerly and said with great affection : “ Why didn’t you come back to me sooner ? I have been waiting for you.” Rakhal did not know what to answer. He looked at the Master and felt that same ecstatic joy. It was as though he were a little child, sitting at the feet of God, the Father of all. From that day onward, the relationship between these two was established. Rakhal saw in Sri Ramakrishna Father, Mother, and God. Sri Ramakrishna saw in Rakhal the Divine Child.

Rakhal’s visits to the Master became more and more frequent. Sometimes he lived at the temple for days together. While he was there, he entirely forgot the everyday world, and became absorbed in the consciousness of God and His presence. He felt himself to be the eternal companion of his Divine Master.

Recalling these early days with Rakhal, Sri Ramakrishna used to tell his intimate disciples : “ No words can describe Rakhal’s spiritual mood at that time. He was living in a trance, as it were. He was like a little child, helpless in its mother’s arms and surrendering itself completely to her—always conscious of the divine relationship. And when he was near me, I also was transported into a higher spiritual consciousness. I used to play with him,

just as Yasoda, the Divine Mother, played with her Divine Child, Krishna."

Rakhal's father, Ananda Mohan, tried in many ways to bring his son's mind back to the interests of worldly life. He gave him strict orders not to go to the temple at Dakshineswar. When his advice and threats were of no avail, he had Rakhal locked in the house. Rakhal longed to go to his Master, and Sri Ramakrishna prayed earnestly to the Divine Mother that all the obstacles in Rakhal's spiritual path might be removed.

One day, Ananda Mohan made Rakhal sit beside him in his study while he looked over some legal documents. Soon Rakhal noticed that his father was deeply absorbed in the work. He seized this opportunity to slip out of the room and hurry off to his Master.

Ananda Mohan knew that Rakhal must have gone to Sri Ramakrishna. But for some days he could do nothing, because he had to attend to a law-suit in the courts. As soon as he had time, however, he went to Dakshineswar, intending to fetch his son home. When Rakhal saw his father coming, he was frightened and wanted to hide. But Sri Ramakrishna would not let him. So Rakhal, fol-

lowing his Master's advice, went to meet his father and greeted him with unusual affection and reverence. It was then that Ananda Mohan had a change of heart. He did not any longer insist on Rakhal's returning home. He only requested Sri Ramakrishna to send the boy occasionally to see him.

So Rakhal began living with the Master at Dakshineswar. One day, his young wife came to the temple with her mother. Sri Ramakrishna looked at her and said : "She is born with a divine nature. She will never be an obstacle to Rakhal's spiritual progress." The Master then sent word to Holy Mother, who was also living at the temple, that she should bless the young girl and welcome her as her daughter-in-law. After receiving blessings from Holy Mother, the mother and daughter went back home.

Rakhal, with a care-free mind, devoted himself to a contemplative life and the service of his beloved guru.

One day, Rakhal told Sri Ramakrishna that he felt very hungry. There was no food in the place. Sri Ramakrishna became greatly concerned. Leaving his room, he went to the bank of the Ganges and shouted : "Gourdasi, come soon ! My Rakhal is hungry !" Shortly

after this, Gourdasi, a woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, arrived by boat with a few other disciples, bringing food. Sri Ramakrishna was as happy as a child, and called Rakhal, saying : “ Here’s food. Go and eat. You are very hungry.”

Rakhal felt embarrassed and said in a low voice : “ Yes, I *am* hungry—but do you have to advertise it ? ”

Sri Ramakrishna innocently replied : “ If you are hungry, what is wrong in saying you need food ? Go and eat now.”

Once, while Rakhal was massaging Sri Ramakrishna with oil, he begged the Master to grant him the power of transcendental vision. At first, Sri Ramakrishna took no notice of his request, and remained silent. When Rakhal persisted, the Master suddenly turned and spoke to him very harshly. Rakhal felt hurt and angry. He smashed the bottle of oil on the ground and ran away. But as he reached the gate of the temple his feet suddenly seemed paralyzed. He could not move another step. Helplessly, he sat down on the road, not knowing what to do. Meanwhile, Sri Ramakrishna sent his nephew, Ramlal, to find Rakhal and calm his anger. Ramlal fetched Rakhal and he slowly returned to the

Master's presence. Sri Ramakrishna looked at him smilingly : "You see ? You couldn't go outside that circle I drew around you !" Rakhal felt ashamed and remained silent.

A few moments later, Sri Ramakrishna went into ecstasy and began to speak to the Divine Mother. "O Mother," he murmured, "I know You have given him one sixteenth part of Your power ; and that power in him will benefit all mankind."

Then, in the same ecstatic mood, he addressed Rakhal, saying : "You were angry with me. Do you know why I made you angry ? There was a purpose in it. Medicine acts only after the sore has been opened." He continued : "Have faith that God is also with Form. He can be seen in that way. Mother is revealed to the man who has controlled his mind."

A few days later, while massaging his Master's feet, Rakhal suddenly lost his external senses and was transported into that super-sensuous realm which he had longed to experience. In later years, Sri Ramakrishna used to point out the exact spot in the room where Rakhal went into ecstasy for the first time.

Naren (Vivekananda) met Sri Ramakrishna

about six months after Rakhal's arrival. Rakhal and Naren were happy to be together again at the feet of their Master. But Naren was shocked one day when he saw Rakhal follow Sri Ramakrishna into the temple of Mother Kali and prostrate himself before the image. For he remembered how Rakhal had signed the pledge of the Brahmo Samaj, promising not to worship images or forms of God. At the first opportunity, Naren reminded Rakhal of his promise and scolded him severely for indulging in image worship. Rakhal was silent. How could he ever make Naren understand what he had experienced through his Master's grace? Yet he could not argue the matter. So, for a few days, Rakhal avoided Naren, and Naren would not speak to Rakhal. Sri Ramakrishna noticed this, and learned the reason for the quarrel. Then he talked affectionately to Naren and made him realize that Rakhal was not responsible for the change in his attitude toward the images. The boys became friends again.

Two years passed away in the holy company of Sri Ramakrishna. Rakhal was living such an intensely spiritual inner life that he had forgotten his duty to his young wife. Shyama-sundari, his mother-in-law, understood him,

however, because of her own devotion to Sri Ramakrishna. She knew how pure Rakhal was, and how devoted to God. She was training her daughter to be a worthy wife. A neighbour once said to her : " It seems your son-in-law is turning into a monk. Why don't you try to bring his mind back to the world, for your daughter's sake ? "

" What can I do ? " Shyamasundari answered. " Everything depends on the will of the Lord. If my son-in-law becomes a monk, I shall regard it as a great blessing."

Soon after this, Shyamasundari came with her daughter to visit Rakhal and asked him to return home. The meeting took place in the presence of Sri Ramakrishna, who remained silent throughout. Later, the Master described it to his other disciples and said : " Rakhal has now reached true spiritual discrimination. I know he will no longer be attached to the world. He has realized the emptiness of earthly pleasures."

The Master felt, however, that Rakhal had a duty to his wife. He told him to visit her from time to time. Rakhal obeyed. Gradually, his visits to his wife became longer. He felt concerned about her and her future. He came to Sri Ramakrishna and asked his advice. The

Master listened to everything he had to say, but refused to tell him definitely which path of life he should follow. With a heavy heart, Rakhal went back to his wife and silently prayed to Sri Ramakrishna to show him the way. Three days passed. Rakhal prayed unceasingly. Suddenly, a veil was removed from his sight and he saw the Divine Maya—the play of Divine Mother. He knew now which path to choose. He and his wife were not to be bound by the ties of marriage. He had a greater mission to fulfil. He was certain, now, that his wife would be taken care of; and, strangely enough, she also felt full of peace. He took leave of her and went straight back to Dakshineswar. The Master knew exactly what had happened. Silently Smiling, he welcomed home his beloved spiritual son.

Sri Ramakrishna knew that Rakhal could not be bound by any earthly attachment. Yet there remained in him a subtle, lingering desire. This desire could not be completely removed from Rakhal's heart until it had had some satisfaction. That was why Sri Ramakrishna had told Rakhal to go back to his wife. Now he knew that, henceforward, Rakhal would be completely free from desire in any form.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say : “ The virtue of truthfulness is ‘most important. If a man always speaks the truth and holds on to the truth tenaciously, he will realize God ; for God is Truth. I prayed to the Divine Mother, saying : ‘ Mother, here is Thy knowledge, here is Thy ignorance—take them both and give me pure love for Yourself. Here is Thy purity, here is Thy impurity—take them both and give me pure love for Yourself. Here is Thy good, here is Thy evil—take them both and give me pure love for Yourself,’ not : ‘ Here is Thy truth, here is Thy untruth—take them both.’ I could not say that.”

One day, Sri Ramakrishna said to Rakhal : “ I can’t look at you. I see a veil of ignorance over your face. Tell me, have you done anything wrong ? ”

Rakhal felt very worried. No matter how hard he tried, he could not remember anything. “ Try to recall,” Sri Ramakrishna said to his disciple, “ if you have told any untruth.” Rakhal at once remembered and admitted that he had recently told a fib in a joking conversation with a friend. Sri Ramakrishna forgave him, but said : “ Never do it again. To speak the exact truth always is a most important spiritual discipline.”

Rakhal's enthusiasm for the spiritual life did not weaken but after a while he ceased to meditate regularly. Sri Ramakrishna noticed this and asked him the reason. Rakhal answered : " I don't always get the inspiration. My heart seems dry, and I feel an emptiness."

" You must never neglect your meditation on that account," Sri Ramakrishna told him. " Make up your mind to practise spiritual disciplines. Then the enthusiasm will come naturally. Those who are farmers by birth and occupation do not and cannot give up farming just because the crops fail. So you must not give up meditation even though you may not get any apparent results. You must be regular in your practice."

That same day, Sri Ramakrishna went as usual to worship in the temple of Mother Kali. Rakhal followed him, and sat down to meditate in the hall facing the shrine. Suddenly he saw the shrine grow strangely luminous. The illumination increased in strength until it was bright as the sun itself, but mellow, not dazzling. This light began to flood through the door of the shrine and seemed about to engulf Rakhal. He was on the verge of losing consciousness. The sensation frightened him. He got up and went out.

Later, Sri Ramakrishna found him sitting silently in his room. "Why did you run away?" the Master asked. "You complain that your heart is dry and that you don't have any more spiritual visions. But you are afraid to see anything. That's not right."

A few days after this, Rakhal was sitting absorbed in meditation in the hall of the temple, and experiencing an ecstatic joy. Sri Ramakrishna approached him in ecstasy and gave him a special mantram for his own use. "Look," said the Master, "there is your Chosen Ideal!" Rakhal in ecstatic vision saw his Chosen Aspect of the Godhead standing before him—living and luminous, with a smile playing on His lips. When Rakhal regained his external consciousness and saw Sri Ramakrishna, he prostrated himself at his feet with loving devotion. Then he knew the divine power and grace of his guru. Sri Ramakrishna returned to his room, and Rakhal became once more absorbed in meditation.

On another occasion, while Rakhal was meditating, his mind became very dry and restless. All his struggles to calm it were of no avail. Disheartened, and disappointed at his own failure, he rose from his seat. Then Sri Ramakrishna came to him and said: "I see

an obstacle on your path. Put out your tongue.” Rakhal obeyed. The Master drew some lines on his disciple’s tongue with his finger and said : “ Now go and meditate.” Rakhal found himself freed from his distractions.

During this period, Sri Ramakrishna taught Rakhal many kinds of spiritual disciplines, and Rakhal used to practise them with great earnestness—but always in privacy and solitude. Often, when Sri Ramakrishna and his devotees were together, a mood of spiritual fervour would come over the whole group. Then Rakhal would go into ecstasy. Once, at the house of Balaram, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, the devotees were chanting the name of God, and the Master was in samadhi. Rakhal was in ecstasy, lying apparently unconscious. When Sri Ramakrishna came out of samadhi, he touched Rakhal on the heart and thus brought him back to normal consciousness.

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, “ M.” records some remarks the Master made about Rakhal’s spiritual condition at this time :

“ Rakhal has grown into a very sweet character now. He practises japam unceasingly—that is the reason you see his lips moving sometimes. When I look at him and notice

his mental condition, I often feel inspired and lose myself in ecstasy.

“Naren, Rakhal and a few others belong to the class of the ‘Ever-perfect’. They are born with God-knowledge. As they begin to grow up, they realize the emptiness of earthly pleasures. The Vedas tell us of a bird called the Homa. This Homa bird lives high in the sky : it never comes down to earth. It lays its eggs in mid-air, but at such a great height that the egg hatches while it is still falling. The little bird comes out and finds itself dashing down toward the earth. When it sees the ground rushing to meet it, it soars up and rejoins its mother in the sky.

“Boys like Rakhal resemble the Homa bird. From their earliest childhood they see the emptiness of the world and their one thought is how to reach God.”

Sri Ramakrishna also remarked : “Rakhal at one time became very sensitive to people. He could not bear the sight of those who were worldly-minded. I too went through the same mood at one time. Rakhal had another mood in which he loved to be alone and taste the divine bliss in complete absorption. At such times, he told me he could not bear even my company. He came here to look after me, but

while he was passing through this state, I had to look after him.”

During this period, Rakhal had some visions, and developed various occult powers. But, following his Master's advice, he learned to pay no attention to them.

To quote his own words : “ While I was with the Master, a man who was living in the temple fell sick. He had no one to look after him, so I nursed him for a few days. One night, when I was sitting beside him, his suffering became intense. I did not know how to help him out of it, so I thought I would repeat the Lord's name and pray for his relief. After I had made japam for some time, a kind of slumber overcame me. In that state I saw a beautiful young girl, about twelve years old, standing before me. She had the look of a goddess. I asked her : ‘ Mother, will this man be cured ? ’ She nodded and answered : ‘ Yes.’ The vision disappeared instantly. Next day, the patient recovered.”

Just as the inside of a cupboard can be seen through its glass doors, so Rakhal could see into any man's heart. He was aware of the character and motives of everybody who visited the temple. And therefore he would refuse to allow any but sincere, earnest people to enter

the Master's presence. Sri Ramakrishna learned that Rakhal possessed this power, and how he was using it. He scolded him severely, saying : " It is mean to use your power this way. He who pays heed to occult powers becomes unable to live in God-knowledge. Take no notice of such powers when they come to you."

In later years, a gentleman once objected to Swami Sharvananda, a disciple of Maharaj, that they were not real holy men, because they did not possess occult powers. When this was reported to Maharaj, he said : " It is easy to acquire occult powers, but hard indeed to attain purity of heart. To find purity of heart is to know the real truth of religion."

There now arose a new obstacle to Rakhal's continued stay with the Master. He became sick, and was sent to Calcutta to live in the house of Balaram. Sri Ramakrishna wanted Balaram to take particular care of his disciple. He told him : " Boys like Naren and Rakhal are born for the divine mission. To serve them is to serve God." Balaram felt very happy to serve his Master's spiritual child. But the climate of Calcutta did not agree with Rakhal. So, with the permission of Sri Ramakrishna, Balaram took him to Brindaban for a change

of air. At first, Rakhal felt better. He found Brindaban very inspiring and wrote speaking highly of it to M. He said in his letter : “ What a wonderfully holy place is Brindaban ! The wild peacocks are dancing all round. The air is full of singing and dancing and the praises of the Lord. Here you feel an unending joy in the Holy Name ! ” Then he became seriously ill. This worried the Master. To quote Sri Ramakrishna’s own words : “ I was extremely worried when I learned of Rakhal’s illness at Brindaban. Brindaban is the holy place where Sri Krishna spent his youth. Since Mother revealed to me that Rakhal is the playmate of Sri Krishna and one of the shepherd boys of Brindaban, I was afraid lest Rakhal should be reminded of his past incarnation. If he remembered his association with Sri Krishna while at Brindaban, he might give up his body there. Therefore I prayed fervently to Divine Mother, and Mother told me that I had no need to worry.”

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna contains this reference to Rakhal’s illness :

“ Sri Ramakrishna speaks of Rakhal : ‘ While massaging my feet, Rakhal had his first ecstasy here. A scholar was with me, expounding the Bhagavatam. As Rakhal listened to

the words of the Scripture, he began to feel ecstatic joy. Then he lost consciousness and became still.

‘His second ecstasy was at Balaram’s house. He fell on the ground, apparently unconscious. Rakhal is a devotee of a very high order—he dwells in the realm of the Personal Aspect of God. If he hears people talking about the Impersonal, he goes out of the room.

‘I prayed to Divine Mother for his recovery. He has renounced everything and he depends entirely on me.

‘He has written to M. from Brindaban, saying how wonderful the place is and how the peacocks are dancing around. But now those peacocks seem to hold no charm for him.

‘Why do I love these boys so much? Because their hearts are so pure.’”

When Rakhal returned from Brindaban, he found that many new disciples had gathered around the Master. Some of them were his old school friends. Soon after this, Sri Ramakrishna fell ill and was finally removed to the Cossipore garden house. Rakhal accompanied him. One after another, several of the young disciples came to live there and look after the Master. It was during this last illness that Sri Ramakrishna formed them into a monastic order,

and fired them with the ideal of renunciation. He began to train each one individually, according to his character and temperament. To some, he offered the gerrua cloth, which symbolizes the life of renunciation. Naren and Rakhal were among these chosen few.

The Master was undoubtedly a very sick man, but he remained the source and centre of a strong spiritual current which transformed the lives and characters of those around him. The Cossipore garden house became a place of bliss, and the disciples' hearts overflowed with joy in God.

During this period, Sri Ramakrishna prepared Naren to deliver his message to mankind. He taught him how to train the young disciples and organize the monastic order. Every day he would talk to Naren for hours together. In the course of one conversation, he told him : "Rakhal has the keen intelligence of a king. If he chose, he could rule a large kingdom." Naren took the hint and understood that the Master wanted Rakhal to be their leader. He lost no time in bringing this about. One day, when all the young disciples were seated together, Naren spoke of Rakhal's greatness and announced : "From today, we shall call Rakhal our king." The

others gladly agreed, knowing the special love which their Master had for Rakhal, and thenceforward always called him Raja, the king. Later on, disciples and devotees began to call him "Maharaj". When Sri Ramakrishna heard Rakhal's new name, he joyfully approved of it.

The Master now knew that he had fulfilled his mission on earth. On the 15th of August, 1886, he passed into mahasamadhi, the highest state of superconsciousness, merging himself in the Divine Mother, and leaving his earthly body.

AFTER THE PASSING AWAY OF THE MASTER

WHILE the Master was still with them, the young disciples had lived in an atmosphere of continual joy and festivity. They were walking the path of God, Who is Infinite Being, Wisdom and Bliss. They tasted the delight of their Master's presence ; and neither the anxieties of the world nor its pleasures and excitements could touch their hearts. "Live in union with Brahman and spread the joy of Brahman all around you." That was the truth the disciples had learned.

In the Gospel according to St. Matthew (IX: 15) we read : "And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridegroom mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them ? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast."

Sri Ramakrishna was taken away from them and they felt a void, an emptiness. The Master

had, as it were, lighted candles in their hearts with a torch of 'blazing fire. Now that the torch was removed, they were conscious of darkness, although the candles were still burning. The candles were not enough for them. They wanted the blazing torch. They wanted to be merged in that blissful consciousness once and forever more.

Guided by an invisible hand, thirsting for God and fired with the ideal of renunciation, the young disciples gathered together and formed the Ramakrishna Monastic Order in Baranagore.

Naren was the centre and heart of this group. Under his guidance the young disciples engaged in study, discussion and religious practices. Rakhal was put in charge of the monastery and made responsible for its general welfare. Naren and Rakhal loved and respected each other deeply. Once, a young member of the group felt discouraged and wished to leave. Rakhal said to him : " Why do you want to run away ? There is such a wonderful atmosphere here. Where else would you find a holy man like Naren ? And where else would you find such love as Naren has for us ? "

Although some members of the new monas-

tery had already received the gerrua cloth from their Master, they now followed Naren's suggestion and went through the formal ritual of sannyasa—the taking of the monastic vow. Naren became known as Swami Vivekananda, and Rakhal as Swami Brahmananda.¹

The disciples now devoted themselves wholeheartedly to spiritual practices. Some days they had nothing to eat ; and their meals were always scanty. Their only thought was of God, and they would remain absorbed in their meditations almost continuously for days and nights on end.

¹ These were the first monks of the Ramakrishna Order, the immediate disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.

Naren	Swami Vivekananda
Rakhal	Swami Brahmananda
Baburam	Swami Premananda
Yogin	Swami Yogananda
Tarak	Swami Shivananda
Sarat	Swami Saradananda
Sashi	Swami Ramakrishnananda
Hari	Swami Turiyananda
Niranjan	Swami Niranjanananda
Latu	Swami Adbhutananda
Gangadhar	Swami Akhandananda
Sarada Prasanna	Swami Trigunatita
Kali	Swami Abhedananda
Gopal Sr.	Swami Advaitananda
Subodh	Swami Subodhananda

Another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Hari Prasanna, joined the monastic order some years later and became Swami Vijnanananda.

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, "M." records the following conversation with Rakhal at the Baranagore Monastery :

"Rakhal and M. were walking in the monastery grounds.

Rakhal : 'Don't waste any more time. Plunge deep into spiritual practices.

'Why have we renounced the world? Some people say if you have failed to realize God, why not go back to the world? But Naren gives the right answer : "Because we could not find Ram, must we live with Shyam and beget children?" Ah, Naren speaks wise words !'

M. : 'What you say is true. I can see that you are filled with a great spiritual longing.'

Rakhal : 'How can I describe the state of my mind? This noon I felt a yearning to go to Narmada and practise austerity. Nothing can be achieved without diving deep into meditation. The outside world is full of distractions. Even Sukadeva, the pure and ever-free, was afraid of the distractions of the world. Even he had to escape from the world.'

M. : 'Yes, the Yogopanishad describes how Sukadeva fled the world—the realm of Maya. It also relates a conversation between Sukadeva

and his father, Vyasa. Vyasa advises him to find God while living his life in the world. Sukadeva answers : "The only truth is God." He saw the emptiness of life in the world, the vanity of lust and greed.'

Rakhal : 'Many people mistakenly imagine that it is enough if one avoids the company of women, but Naren expressed the truth beautifully last night. He said : "Woman exists for a man as long as he has lust. When you are free from lust, you do not see any difference between the sexes."'

M. : 'That is true. Children do not see the difference in sex.'

Rakhal : 'That is why I believe we must plunge deep within. To reach enlightenment, a man must transcend Maya, the domain of lust and greed.' "

Most of the young disciples now wanted to retire into complete solitude and live absorbed in God. The divine touch of their Master had already enabled them to experience the transcendental realm. What they had momentarily achieved through his grace, they now wished to win as a permanent possession by their own efforts. They wanted to live altogether in that consciousness. We find Swami Brahmananda

eager to go into solitude, live on alms and dwell constantly in union with Brahman.

Maharaj talked to Swamiji (as Vivekananda was usually called) about his intention of living for some time as a wandering monk, surrendering himself completely to God. Swamiji agreed, but wanted Swami Subodhananda to go with Maharaj and look after him. Because of his deep love for Maharaj, Swamiji was always concerned for him and wished him to have someone who would minister to his comforts. Maharaj could not refuse his brother's wish, so he and Swami Subodhananda left together for Benares. They stayed there a month. From Benares they went on to the temple of Omkarnath, by the River Narmada. Here, amidst charming natural surroundings, Maharaj lived continuously in nirvikalpa samadhi for six days and six nights. He remained unconscious of the outside world. When he came back at last to normal consciousness, his face beamed with a heavenly joy. He had experienced God in the impersonal, absolute aspect, and realized the identity of the Atman with Brahman.

The two Swamis went on to Panchavati by the River Godavari, where Sita and Rama are traditionally supposed to have lived during their exile. There is a temple dedicated to them.

Here, Brahmananda felt and saw the living presence of these two divine incarnations ; while chanting the Holy Name, he became absorbed in samadhi for three days and three nights.

During these periods, Swami Subodhananda used to watch over Maharaj with mingled joy and anxiety. There was a danger that Maharaj might pass out of the body while in samadhi and not return to earthly life. His brother Swami was always careful to prevent this.

From Panchavati, they went on to Dwaraka, the well-known place of pilgrimage. A sacred river flowed through it called the Gomati, in which pilgrims bathed in order to acquire merit. Each pilgrim must pay a dollar tax for this privilege, however, and neither Maharaj nor Subodhananda had any money. A rich merchant recognized them as holy men and offered to pay their tax, but Maharaj refused. He did not want to buy religious merit, and preferred to take his bath in the nearby ocean. This impressed the merchant so much that he also refused to pay the tax and came to bathe with the two Swamis. He then invited them to his residence and entertained them for three days. He offered them money for their further travels, but this also Maharaj refused to accept. So

the merchant suggested that he should give them letters of introduction to his agents in different parts of the country, so that their comforts would be attended to wherever they went. But Maharaj would not take the letters. "I need nothing from anybody," he said : "The Lord is my only refuge, and He will look after us." The merchant then gave him a copy of the Bhagavad Gita, which was gladly accepted.

From Dwaraka they visited various places of pilgrimage and finally reached Brindaban. During this second visit to the holy city, Maharaj wrote Balaram the following letter :

"Who can fathom the workings of God—His divine play? Man remains subject to happiness and misery as long as he is bound by Karma. This is the lot of every man—no matter whether he is learned or ignorant, good or wicked. Rare indeed is he who has attained unalloyed bliss ! Only a man who is free from all cravings can find unending joy.

"There is more misery than happiness in this world. Most people live in misery. God the Father is loving and kind. Who can explain why His children suffer ?

"Man suffers for his ignorance. This ignorance is his sense of ego. When a man is free

from this ego-sense, surrendering his life, his mind and his intellect at the blessed feet of the Lord of all, and when he has nothing that he calls his own—he is blessed indeed. That man alone is truly happy.

“Man can accomplish nothing by himself. There is only one thing to be done : pray to God and pray unceasingly. Thus we may forget the ego altogether and remember continually that He alone is real, that He alone is the Truth. Then only can we be freed from ignorance.

“Sri Ramakrishna used to say : ‘How many love God as they love their own kith and kin ? How many even want to love Him ?’

“The mind is created out of those three gunas which also make up the outer world. Therefore the mind loves to dwell on worldly thoughts. This is the very nature and stuff of the mind. It is only through divine grace that a man can withdraw his mind from the external world and keep it fixed upon God’s Holy Feet.

“I pray to the Lord that I may be completely freed from consciousness of the physical world. Bless me, that I may remain absorbed in the Lotus Feet of the Guru—that is the one desire of my heart.”

Here in Brindaban, Brahmananda lived in a state of continuous ecstasy, almost entirely losing his consciousness of the physical world. Subodhananda watched over him, lovingly. Brahmananda rarely spoke to him, for his mind dwelt in another realm. Subodhananda would beg food from door to door and place it silently in a corner of his brother's cell. Brahmananda would rise from meditation at a regular hour, in order to eat something, but if Subodhananda was late and he did not find the food in the usual place, he did not care. He simply returned to his meditation and ate nothing until the next day. Sometimes Subodhananda would collect a rather more luxurious meal, with curries of various kinds. But he noticed that Brahmananda merely satisfied his hunger from one of the dishes and left the rest untouched. This was not because Maharaj was deliberately practising any austerity or mortification of the flesh. He was so absorbed in the thought of God that the taste for food or any other sense-object had completely left him. He ate only to keep the body alive. In later years Maharaj used to say : " It is easy to practise austerity by not allowing the mind to come into contact with sense-objects, but it is hard to get rid of the mental craving itself.

And of all cravings the subtle desire of the organ of taste is the most difficult to overcome. A man loses this craving only when he is in a high spiritual state."

Observing Maharaj thus absorbed in contemplation and neglecting food and sleep, Subodhananda one day asked him : " Why do you live so strictly ? You are the spiritual son of God Incarnate. The Master has already done everything for you. Through his grace you have attained samadhi. Why do you still have to sit like a beggar, begging for the Lord's grace ? "

" What you say is true," Maharaj answered : " The Master did everything for us. But still I find a lack within. This proves that we need repeated practice in order to make the state of samadhi natural and habitual to us. You know Uddhava was a devoted disciple and friend of Sri Krishna. Through Sri Krishna's grace he realized God. And yet Sri Krishna sent him to the Himalayas to live in solitude and contemplation."

Bijoy Krishna Goswami, a well-known saint, who was living in Brindaban at this time, asked Brahmananda the same question. Brahmananda replied simply : " I am only trying to become established in the vision of God which

I received through my Master's grace." Bijoy Krishna and Maharaj used sometimes to meet and talk about God.

Subodhananda, who had cared for Maharaj so faithfully, now became eager to live in solitude himself and practise austerity. With the blessings and permission of Maharaj, he went to Hardwar at the foot of the Himalayas.

Maharaj was now alone in Brindaban. But he did not feel lonely. He plunged once more into the consciousness of God. Suddenly, one day, he saw in a vision the shining form of his devoted brother-disciple Balaram standing before him. Balaram was smiling a heavenly smile. Gradually his form was merged into the light of the divine realm. Next day, Maharaj received the news that Balaram had passed away. He felt a pang of grief, for he loved Balaram dearly. Then he realized that this sorrow was also a form of attachment. More strongly than ever he felt a desire to forget the things of the world and plunge deep into the inner kingdom of God. He left Brindaban and began to walk towards Hardwar.

At Hardwar, Maharaj was simply overwhelmed by the breath-taking grandeur and beauty of the Himalayas, and of the Ganges running its course at their feet. Only two

miles away is the quiet little village of Kankhal, sanctified by the presence of many monks belonging to various orders, who come there to lead contemplative lives. There Maharaj settled in a little hut not far from the Ganges. The present Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service is now situated on that very spot.

Swamis Vivekananda, Turiyananda, Saradananda, Subodhananda and others—the monastic disciples of the Master—were then leading contemplative lives at Hrishikesh, in the same neighbourhood. Before long, they learned that Brahmananda was at Kankhal and all came to visit him. Vivekananda wanted to go to Delhi and asked Maharaj and the rest of his brother-disciples to accompany him. Maharaj could not refuse any wish of Swamiji's, but first he wanted to visit Swami Akhandananda, another brother-disciple, who was living in Meerut. To Meerut, therefore, they all went and spent some memorable days in meditation and study, happy to be in one another's company. Then Swamiji left for Delhi alone ; the rest of them followed later.

The lives of holy men, and especially their travels, must often appear curiously aimless to the ordinary observer. Ever obedient to the voice of God within them, they can make no

fixed plans, as worldly people do. All their intentions are subject to unexpected change. No sooner were the Swamis gathered in Delhi, than Vivekananda told them that he must go on alone. The inner voice commanded him to seek solitude. "We shall meet again when the Lord wills," he told his brothers, as he said goodbye.

Maharaj now asked Swami Turiyananda to be his companion in pilgrimage. Turiyananda readily agreed, and this pleased Maharaj very much, for Sri Ramakrishna had once told him to "keep company with Brother Hari".

In Hari (Turiyananda), devotion and knowledge were harmoniously developed. Deeply learned in the scriptures, he lived a life of great austerity and immaculate purity. Sri Ramakrishna used to speak of him as a man of renunciation, strictly embodying the ideal of the Gita.

The two Swamis now travelled together, mostly on foot, and visited many sacred temples in the northern part of India. Turiyananda has told us that whenever Maharaj entered any shrine he would be filled with ecstatic devotion for the particular aspect of God to which that temple was dedicated. And ultimately he would have direct vision of the living deity

within the temple. In later years, when Maharaj was asked by a disciple if the gods and goddesses are real, he answered : “ The one Godhead has many spiritual forms. All these forms are real. A seer can see them and talk to them.”

After nearly two years of pilgrimage, the Swamis arrived in Bombay. There they met Kalipada Ghosh, a devoted disciple of the Master who lived in that city. A joyful surprise awaited them, for, at Kalipada's house, was Swamiji himself. Since the parting at Delhi, they had known nothing of his whereabouts. Swamiji was now preparing for his first journey to the United States of America. Before embarking he was requested to go and bless the new-born prince of Khetri. Brahmananda and Turiyananda went with him on the train as far as the Abu Road station. While Vivekananda was with the prince, they visited Mt. Abu, where there is a beautiful Jaina temple. A few days later they returned to the station in time to exchange a few words with Swamiji as his train passed through. This meeting was very short. Swamiji hastily told Turiyananda : “ Please go back to the Baranagore Monastery. You are wanted there. Let Raja live alone.”

Turiyananda had no time to explain to Swamiji that he could not leave Maharaj alone just then. Brahmananda's spiritual consciousness was tuned so high that he had no regard for his body, and could not look after it. So he remained with Brahmananda and the two of them returned to Mt. Abu, where they lived a life of contemplation. Turiyananda begged food for his brother and watched over him just as Subodhananda had done.

After some time, Maharaj felt that they should return to Brindaban. Here Turiyananda experienced a mood of ecstatic joy. "I am not going to get any food today," he told Maharaj: "Let us see if Radha (the Holy Mother of Brindaban) will feed us." They sat down to meditate. Day and night passed for both in blissful absorption, without any consciousness of hunger or thirst. Next morning, as they rose from their meditation, they saw a devotee approaching them with quantities of food. By this time they were both hungry and ate with relish.

After a few days in Brindaban, they went to Lake Kusum, a solitary place near the Holy City. There are huts on the lake shore where monks can pass their days in solitude and contemplation. The Swamis lived for

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some months, completely forgetting the outer world.

Swami Turiyananda told me of an interesting experience Maharaj had at Lake Kusum. For several nights in succession, he was disturbed, as he sat down to meditate, by peculiar noises and by the falling of pebbles and dust around him out of the air. At length Maharaj saw the spirit of a dead man standing before him. "Why are you disturbing me like this?" he asked. The spirit answered that he had been trying to attract the Swami's attention. He begged Maharaj to liberate him from his pitiful condition. Maharaj replied that he did not know how to do this. "You are a holy man," the spirit told him: "If you will just pray for my release, I shall be liberated." Maharaj did as he was asked. After this, there were no more disturbances.

During his stay at Lake Kusum, Maharaj had the habit of rising at midnight and spending the rest of the night in meditation. One night, however, he felt tired and overslept his usual hour of rising. Some one gave him a push and aroused him. At first he thought that this must be Swami Turiyananda. Then he saw a luminous figure, in the dress of a Vaishnava saint, standing beside him and counting his

beads. After this, the figure appeared almost every night, at midnight, and joined him in his meditation. In describing this incident to his disciples, Maharaj once remarked : “Many holy men, after leaving the physical body, live in subtle spiritual bodies, and help earnest religious aspirants in different ways.”

Toward the end of the year 1893, Turiyananda received a letter from a brother disciple, describing Swamiji's success in America and requesting him to come back to the monastery, which had now been moved from Baranagore to Alambazar. Turiyananda read the contents of the letter to Maharaj and asked for his advice. Maharaj agreed that he ought to return. “Don't worry about me,” he said : “Go back to the monastery. You are needed there to do the work of the Lord.”

So Turiyananda unwillingly took his departure, and Maharaj remained alone a year in Brindaban. During this period, he sometimes took a vow not to ask anyone for food or other necessities of life. Usually an unknown devotee brought food to his door. Then there would be days when he had nothing. Once, while he was sitting in silence, a stranger laid a warm, new blanket beside him. A few moments later another stranger came by and took the blanket

away. Maharaj never moved. He smiled to himself, watching the strange play of the Divine Mother.

During the special festivities in memory of Sri Krishna, Brahmananda joined the devotees at a nearby temple. The crowd was chanting the name of God and singing Krishna's praises before the shrine. An aged holy man of the Vaishnava sect was sitting in one corner, counting his beads. Suddenly he turned toward Maharaj and beckoned him to approach, indicating with affectionate gestures that he should sit down beside him. The two began to meditate : as Maharaj became absorbed, he felt the Vaishnava touch his head with his beads. He did this repeatedly, and each time, as Brahmananda received the saint's touch, his hair stood on end and he experienced an ecstatic joy.

By constant practice throughout these years of pilgrimage, Maharaj had at last achieved his aim. The state of samadhi was now his own possession. He had won it for himself and he dwelt in it continually. Even in the periods of his normal consciousness, there was, as he said, " a fullness of God " in his heart. All around him, wherever he went, nature seemed to vibrate with joy. Established at last and forever

in God-consciousness, he felt ready to answer the call of worldly duty. One day, he suddenly left for Calcutta, carrying that heavenly joy within his heart.

MAHARAJ AS HEAD OF THE RAMAKRISHNA ORDER

THE return of Maharaj to Calcutta created a stir amongst his brother-disciples. His presence brought to them a new upsurge of spiritual joy. One day he told Swami Premananda : " Though I was very happy in Brin-
daban, I left the Holy City to live in the monastery here. I want to serve my brothers and mankind. Our Master was the embodiment of supreme love and devotion. Our lives must be such that people all over the world, burdened by earthly sufferings and miseries may learn to take the holy name of Sri Ramakrishna and find rest and peace in him."

When Swamiji, who was still in America, heard of Brahmananda's return to Calcutta, he felt himself freed from any further anxiety about the conduct of the Ramakrishna Order in India. His letters to Maharaj were full of the spirit of universal service. And Maharaj, in his turn, would inspire his brother-disciples. All felt an unbounded confidence in Swamiji

and Maharaj, but the love of these two for each other was so deep^e and so spiritual that no one else could fully understand it. Two years after Brahmananda's return from Brindaban, Swamiji came back from America. A public reception was prepared for him at a house in Calcutta. Maharaj himself was the first to welcome his brother, placing a garland of flowers around his neck. Swamiji, in his turn, touched the feet of Maharaj, quoting a saying from the scriptures : "The son of a guru is to be regarded as the guru himself." (meaning that Brahmananda was the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna). Smiling sweetly, Maharaj touched his feet and returned the compliment with another quotation : "One's elder brother is to be respected like one's father."

Swamiji was then taken to the Alambazar Monastery. He placed in Brahmananda's hands all the money which American devotees had subscribed toward the Indian mission. "All this time," he said, "I have been acting as a trustee. It is a relief to give this back to its real owner—our Raja."

The natures of the two friends were widely dissimilar, and yet, in a sense, complementary. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna : "Narendwells in the realm of the Absolute, the Imper-

sonal. He is like a sharp, drawn sword of discrimination. Rakhal dwells in the realm of God, the Sweet One, the Repository of all blessed qualities. He is like a child on the lap of his mother, completely surrendering himself to her in every way."

Vivekananda was like the flaming fire, the mid-day sun—burning up all evil and impurity. Brahmananda was like a soft, cool light, soothing the aching heart. Vivekananda was like the deep and restless ocean—always eager to do the work of the spirit, always fighting against ignorance and superstition. Brahmananda was like the blue sky, vast and patient in spirit. The manner of his working was inward and silent.

Swamiji laid the foundation for the spiritual undertaking entrusted to him by his Master : Maharaj built its edifice. Swamiji, with his dynamic, aggressive personality, could wake a man from the sleep of ignorance : Maharaj with his characteristic serenity could show him the way to mould his life in God.

Each paid memorable tribute to the other. "Through Swamiji," said Brahmananda, "the world has come to know of Sri Ramakrishna. But for him, very few could have understood our Master's genius." And in the words of

Swamiji : “ Raja is the greatest treasure house of spirituality.” Once a European devotee came to visit Swamiji in the monastery, wishing to have his spiritual problems solved. Swamiji sent him to Maharaj, saying : “ There is a dynamo working and we are all under him.” After talking to Maharaj, the devotee expressed his gratitude and told Swamiji that all his doubts had been removed.

Swami Saradananda rightly remarks : “ If Swami Vivekananda was loved and cherished by the Master as the means by which his spiritual mission was to be proclaimed to the world, Swami Brahmananda was no less valued by him as the future head of his organization.”

We have already described how, before visiting America, Swamiji had spent more than two years as a wandering monk, travelling the length and breadth of India. It was at this time that he came to understand the inner source of his country's strength, for he saw how the masses still held fast to the ancient ideals of religious life. But he saw also the miserable poverty, the lack of education and all the evils that accompany them. Swamiji's heart thrilled with pride in his country's spiritual greatness, and bled for its material distress.

When he came to the West, he found the picture exactly reversed. On the one hand, physical comfort material prosperity, high standards of education, all the achievements of the human intellect : on the other hand, spiritual poverty, and a failure to understand life's only purpose—the unfoldment of the God within man. He saw, in short, that the West had failed to accept whole-heartedly the ideals of Jesus Christ. The perfect civilization, Swamiji realized, consists in blending and harmonizing the genius of the East with that of the West. Expressed philosophically, it is the blending of the active and the contemplative life.

When Swamiji returned to India, he talked to his brother-disciples, giving a new expression to the ideals for which Sri Ramakrishna had stood. It is not enough, said Swamiji, to devote your entire life to the realization of God for yourself alone. You must also live “for the good of all, for the happiness of all.” Swamiji wished his brothers to combine contemplative life with life of service to mankind. Brahmananda was the first to recognize the depth and scope of Swamiji's ideals, and he gave them his full support.

On the first of May, 1897, Swamiji called a representative meeting of the monastic and lay

disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. At this meeting, the organization known as the Ramakrishna Mission was formed. Maharaj was elected president of the Calcutta Centre. Later, early in 1902, before the passing away of Swamiji, he was made head of the Order, and he held that office for more than twenty years, until his passing away. The phenomenal growth of the Mission during his lifetime is too well-known to need recording here. Whenever India has suffered any great flood or famine or other calamity, the monks of the Ramakrishna Order have come forward to relieve the distress of the people. Besides its innumerable emergency relief stations, opened temporarily, it has established permanent charitable and religious institutions all over the country. Preaching centres and monasteries have also been opened in Europe and in North and South America. At the beginning of 1899, the permanent headquarters of the Mission were established at Belur on the Ganges, now well-known as the Belur Math.

Foreign visitors to India have spoken highly in appreciation of the Mission's success in social service. To the monks of the Order, however, such success can be only of secondary importance. Maharaj always insisted on

this : “The one purpose of life is to know God. Plunge deep into the sea of bliss and become immortals. Attain knowledge and devotion, then serve God in mankind. Work is not the end of life. Disinterested work is a means of attaining devotion. Meditate, meditate, and dive deep within. Know that God alone is real. Keep at least three-fourths of your mind in God. It is enough if you give one-fourths to service. Work and worship.”

A young disciple of Swamiji, inspired by his ideals of renunciation and service, devoted himself to nursing the sick and helping the poor. From a very humble beginning, his work grew into a huge organization. For many years this disciple was the head of one of the largest homes of service in India under the Ramakrishna Mission. But when Maharaj saw that his work was becoming more important to him than his spiritual life, he relieved him of his post, inspired him with the ideal of God-realization, and sent him away to live a life of exclusive meditation.

To quote Maharaj again : “Yes, you must work. But I insist that you devote yourselves to spiritual practices and meditation. Even though I may not ask you to work, your nature

will force you to work. But it is difficult to engage the mind in contemplation of God ; but you are monks, therefore, work must not be the sole purpose of your lives."

Once, a millionaire, who had lost his wife, came to the monastery and said he wished to renounce the world and give up all his wealth to the Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Premananda reported this to Maharaj, who folded his hands and said gently : " Brother, a worldly man who associates with a holy man like yourself naturally becomes inspired by the ideal of renunciation. Shall we in our turn become worldly because we have met a worldly man ? " Maharaj refused to accept the money, for he knew by his insight that the millionaire would later regret his offer, being, as he was, very much attached to his wealth.

In the same way, he refused to accept a gift of real estate, knowing that the emotion which prompted the offer was merely temporary. He realized that the work of the Mission could not prosper unless it was founded on a firm spiritual basis.

Maharaj was more interested in the spiritual growth of his disciples than in their efficiency. He once reprimanded a senior disciple who had been put in charge of a younger brother,

saying : “ Did I send you this young boy to make a good clerk out of him ? ” On another occasion, when a senior disciple of Swamiji was taking one of the younger disciples to task for negligence in some duty, Maharaj overheard the conversation and told him : “ Of course, it is wrong if this young man neglects his allotted duty. You have the right to scold him for that. But tell me, do you ever inquire if he is doing his duty to himself ? Do you ask him if he is meditating regularly or if he has any difficulties in his progress towards God ? Is the work of the Mission more important to you than this boy’s spiritual growth ? ”

No doubt Maharaj held that the ideal of selfless service, of serving God in man, is a form of worship. But he also pointed out that, without the practice of meditation, it is hard to work as worship and that it is utterly impossible to annihilate the ego simply by actions, however selfless they may be. We must act but we must also try by our meditation to merge the ego in God.

Jesus said : “ Love thy neighbour as thyself.” But really to love mankind an aspirant must also learn to love God with all his heart, his soul and his mind. Maharaj once told me : “ My boy, devote yourself to spiritual practices.

Attain knowledge and devotion. Then you will see how your heart will overflow with love and sympathy for mankind. You will also find out how unnecessary is man's suffering, carrying as he does this mine of bliss within himself.

Maharaj kept a watchful eye on the progress of each member of our Order. He turned our hearts continually toward God and directed our actions and the activities of the Mission toward the integrating of that inner strength which alone can benefit mankind physically, morally and spiritually.

When young men of varied temperaments live together, it is only natural that there will be misunderstandings from time to time, no matter how high their common ideal may be. In one of our monasteries, connected with a Home of Service, there were a number of young members, not yet trained, fresh from school and college. When they had been together a while, their old tendencies began to reassert themselves : they formed rival groups and started to quarrel. A senior Swami of the Order went to investigate the whole affair. He questioned everybody and soon found out who were the ring-leaders. Then he wrote to Swami Brahmananda telling him that some of

these boys were unfit for monastic life, and should be expelled. Maharaj^{*} replied : " Don't do anything. I am coming to see to it myself."

When he arrived, he did not question anybody. He simply started living in the monastery. On one thing only he insisted : that all the boys should meditate regularly in his presence. Then he began to instruct them, without making any distinction between individuals, good or bad. Gradually the whole atmosphere of the place improved. The boys forgot their quarrels because they no longer had any time for them. And when Maharaj left, after two or three months, there was perfect harmony in the monastery. Nobody had been expelled. All had become better and more spiritual.

Another time, there were two young monks who quarrelled and came to blows. Swami Premananda heard of it and came anxiously to Maharaj. " Maharaj," he said, " we brother-disciples have lived together in peace and harmony for many years. Never have we fought or quarrelled ; never has a harsh word been spoken among us. What shall we do with these boys ? Ought we not to expel them ? "

“Brother,” Swami Brahmananda answered gently, “it is true³ that they have been making trouble, but remember also that they came here to take refuge at the blessed feet of Sri Ramakrishna. They look to you for counsel and guidance. Surely you can do something for them that will transform their lives and bring love into their hearts.”

“You are right,” Swami Premananda replied, “they have taken refuge here ; but, brother, it is you who must bless them and transform them.”

Then Swami Premananda gathered the monks together, seniors and novices alike, and led them in procession to Maharaj. With folded hands, the Swami asked Maharaj to bless them all. As he spoke, Maharaj entered into an exalted spiritual mood. He became deeply absorbed and his right hand was raised in benediction.

Seeing this Swami Premananda asked Swami Shuddhananda, a senior disciple of Swamiji, to prostrate before Maharaj and receive his blessing. Every monk and every initiate followed his example, and Maharaj touched the head of each with his uplifted hand. Speaking from my own experience, I can only say that that touch was like a cooling spring to a fevered

body. It gave one an inner exaltation which could be felt but not described. All our troubles were forgotten and our hearts were full of love.

“Keep your mind as high as the mountains,” Maharaj told a disciple whom he was sending to a monastery in the Himalayas. He himself lived always in an exalted state of consciousness, which subtly transformed the lives and characters of those around him. If you intensify the spiritual life, your outer life will adjust itself automatically and this principle applies equally to the life of an organization. Maharaj was once asked to make some new rules for the guidance of the young monks. He replied : “Swamiji has already made our rules for us. We do not need to add any new ones. Add more love, attain more devotion and help others to move toward the ideal of God.”

As the network of monasteries and homes of service spread over India, Maharaj began to visit them, staying a few months and inspiring everybody by his presence. There was an air of festivity wherever he went. Once, in speaking of him, Swami Turiyananda quoted a verse from the Bhagavatam : “Those who realize the eternal presence of the Lord in their hearts are endowed with goodness and beauty and their

lives are a perpetual festival of joy." The Swami added : " Maharaj carries with him such an intense spiritual atmosphere that whoever comes into his orbit is carried towards God as if by a spiritual current and is filled with divine joy." Once a professor who had lived for a week in the monastery which Maharaj was visiting, said to me : " I don't know what kind of people you boys are. But if you can live in the rarefied atmosphere of Maharaj, day after day, you must be great. I can't stand it long, myself. I need to breathe a little worldly air." However, after this, the professor could not breathe his worldly air for long. Maharaj had given him a taste of the joy of God. Soon afterwards, he came back and joined the Order.

Though Maharaj could not be in all the centres at once or live with all his disciples, he kept a watchful eye on everybody. One day he said to me : " Do you think I don't know what you boys have been doing and how you have been faring in the path to God ? I may live in one place and seem to be unconcerned, but I know what is happening to each of you. I even know what . . . is doing in America." Maharaj did not possess this knowledge through the ordinary means of communication, but by his extraordinary power. And he was not satisfied

with merely knowing : he sent spiritual aid to everyone in due course. •

Even if a member of the Order was guilty of some serious offence and there would be talk of his expulsion, Maharaj would forgive his past misdeeds and transform him by his touch. He used to say : “ The sins of many births can be wiped out in a moment by one glance from the gracious eyes of God.” Once he said to me : “ What is morality ? If one acquires devotion to God, morality and purity will follow, without our even trying to be moral or pure.”

“ Practice, practice,” he would tell us : “ Through practice of the spiritual disciplines, the heart will be purified and a new realm will open. You will realize that God alone is real, and that everything else is unreal. But when, through japam¹ and meditation, a little awakening comes, do not imagine you have achieved the end. Light ! More light ! Onward ! Onward ! Attain God ! Gain His vision ! Talk to Him ! ”

The success of a religious body depends, not on its external achievements, its efficient organizations, its buildings, the size of its membership or its philanthropic activities—but upon

¹ See Appendix.

the inner life of each of its members and the measure of their 'progress toward devotion and God-knowledge. This is the truth that Maharaj, as head of the Order, impressed indelibly upon our minds.

MAHARAJ AS GURU

SRI RAMAKRISHNA once said : “ When the lotus blossoms, bees come of their own accord to gather the honey. When the lotus of a man’s heart blossoms in the joy of God, spiritual aspirants will flock to him.” Many times we have watched Maharaj sitting amongst a crowd of devotees. One moment, he would be as joyful and full of fun as a little boy ; then suddenly his mind would become indrawn and the whole atmosphere would vibrate with a sense of the presence of God. At such times, those who had come to visit him would find that all their doubts and problems had been solved. They would rise and leave his presence, exalted and comforted, although they had not exchanged a single word with Maharaj himself.

The monastic Order included many disciples of Holy Mother and Swamiji. But most of these had little opportunity of associating with their gurus. Swamiji passed away in 1902. Holy Mother did not live at the monastery. She would tell her disciples to follow the disciplines prescribed by Maharaj. Maharaj him-

self also accepted disciples, but at first he was very particular. Often he would initiate them only after many years of probation. During the ceremony of initiation, Maharaj would be filled with an ecstasy of love ; and the disciple would feel an extraordinary sense of the divine presence.

Holy Mother once complained that Maharaj did not accept enough disciples. It so happened that just then Maharaj was invited to see a play about the life of Ramanuja, which had been written by one of his own devotees. In this drama there is a scene which expresses Ramanuja's great love for mankind. The action is as follows :

Ramanuja's guru initiates him with a sacred mantram, and warns him never to reveal it to any one. " What will happen if I do ? " Ramanuja asks. And his guru replies : " Whoever hears this mantram will be liberated from the bondage of his ignorance but you yourself will suffer damnation." Ramanuja goes at once into the temple, gathers a crowd around him, and utters the sacred mantram in the hearing of all. His guru pretends to be very angry, and rebukes him for his disobedience. Ramanuja answers : " If my damnation can liberate so many people, then my supreme desire is to

be damned." The guru is delighted. "You are great indeed!" he exclaims. "I give you my blessing." And he declares that the philosophy of qualified monism is to be known, in future, as the Ramanuja philosophy.

This drama and Holy Mother's remark both made a deep impression upon Maharaj. After this, he initiated many more disciples.

Once, while Maharaj and Swami Turiyananda were in Brindaban, a young boy (later Swami Ambikananda) came to visit them. The boy knew Turiyananda already and would talk to him for hours, but he was shy of Maharaj, whom he regarded as very serious and austere. Turiyananda knew this, and one day told him: "Go and prostrate yourself before Maharaj. Touch his feet, and sit by him a while." The boy did so. Maharaj blessed him, touching his head and his back. At once, the boy began to feel differently: all his shyness disappeared. He knew now that Maharaj loved him, and his own heart was filled with love. From that day onward, he was devoted to Maharaj. Maharaj said jokingly to Turiyananda: "You see, I have stolen your disciple!" Turiyananda laughed: "That's splendid!" he said. "The boy is blessed indeed."

Maharaj could recognize his future disciples

at first sight, and bind them to him at once with an indescribable love. Even as he met them, he knew which spiritual path each should follow. Two young college boys came to visit him. To one of them, he said jokingly : " Let me see your palm." As he looked at it, he remarked : " You have a tendency toward worldly enjoyments. But, by the Lord's grace, you may be able to overcome it in the end." Swami Premananda, who was present, asked Maharaj to look at the other boy's hand also. He replied, smiling : " I don't need to." This made the other boy (who was later to be known as Swami Yatiswarananda) feel sad. He thought to himself : " My friend has some chance of becoming a monk, but I have none." A few days later, he came alone to visit Maharaj at the Belur Monastery. He met Swami Brahmananda's personal attendant, who told him : " Maharaj said that you would become a monk." And so he did, a few years later. The other boy got married, but remained a devotee.

Before Yatiswarananda became a monk, Maharaj told him : " Give your body and mind to worldly enjoyments, and the world will destroy both your mind and body. Devote them to God and His service, and you will

enjoy bodily health and peace and happiness of mind.” •

This is Yatiswarananda's own description of his initiation : “ The day Maharaj was to initiate me, I felt a spiritual power tangibly emanating from him. After the initiation, I bowed down to him. He raised his hand in benediction above my head, giving me instantly a vivid consciousness of an Immanent Presence. I realized that the whole universe was merged in that Presence. That day, also, I got a glimpse of the divine nature and power of the Guru. I was literally translated into a new life. The power he transmitted to me that day is still working within me.”

There are some instances of persons receiving initiation from Maharaj in their dreams. This even happened when the dreamer had never seen him in the flesh, but had simply heard about him and felt attracted by his name. One devout young woman had such a dream, and went to see Maharaj to confirm it. She recognized Maharaj at first sight, although he was seated amongst his brother-disciples, and began to describe her experience. When she was about to repeat the mantram she had received in her dream, Maharaj stopped her. “ Don't tell me,” he said : “ I will tell you what

it was." This convinced her of the truth of her vision. ⁶

A young boy also received a mantram from Maharaj in dream, but unfortunately forgot it when he woke. Soon afterward, he went to Maharaj for initiation. During the ceremony, the dream-mantram returned to his mind. He was delighted and surprised when Maharaj gave him that very same mantram, a few moments later.

There were two ladies belonging to an aristocratic family who both saw Sri Ramakrishna in a dream, although they had never heard or read anything about him. He told them to go and visit Maharaj in Madras. They went, and were initiated. After relating this incident, Maharaj remarked to me : " You see how Sri Ramakrishna does his own preaching ? We may think that we work for him—that is just our ignorance."

Girish Chandra Ghosh, the famous Bengali dramatist who became a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, tells the following story about Brahmananda's extraordinary power : " Compared to myself, Rakhal is only a young lad. I know that Sri Ramakrishna regarded him as his spiritual son, but that is not the only reason why I feel such a deep reverence for him.

Once, while I was seriously ill, I found that I had lost my faith in Sri Ramakrishna. My heart felt dry. Many of the brother-disciples came to see me. I told them about the unhappy state of my mind, but they only kept silent. Then, one day, Rakhal came. He asked me how I felt, and I described the dryness and lack of devotion from which I was suffering. Rakhal listened attentively, then he laughed aloud. 'Why worry about it?' he asked me. 'The wave rises high out of the ocean; then it goes down again, and again it rises. The mind is like that. But please do not worry. Your present mood is due to the fact that you are about to rise to a much higher level of spirituality. The wave of the mind is gathering its strength.' When he left me, all the dryness in my heart was gone. My faith had returned, and my mind rose to a higher level than before."

Although Maharaj had initiated me while I was still a college student, I had no intention of entering the Order. However, during one Christmas vacation, I came to live for a few days at the monastery. Swami Shuddhananda, a disciple of Swamiji, used to urge me to become a monk. But I would argue with him : I thought the monastic life was lazy. I

wanted to devote myself to political action, believing that India must be freed from the domination of the British. An old gentleman, who was also a guest of the monastery, used to be present at these arguments. Swami Shuddhananda could never convince me. One morning, as usual, I went to prostrate myself before Maharaj. This old gentleman was also in the room. Suddenly he asked Maharaj : " When is this boy going to become a monk ? " Maharaj looked me up and down. His eyes had an unforgettable sweetness. Then he answered quietly : " When the Lord wills." That was the end of my political plans and ambitions. I remained at the monastery.

My own case was not exceptional. Many politically-minded young men who came into contact with Maharaj were inspired by the spiritual ideals of renunciation, service and God-knowledge. They began to realize that the awakening of India would never come through political action, but only through an intensification of the nation's spiritual life — and that this would benefit not India merely but all mankind.

Maharaj had wonderful insight into the character and spiritual growth of individuals. A friend of mine, whom he knew, renounced the

world and went to Hrishikesh to practise austerity. He would not accept the guidance of any guru. After a few months' practice, he wrote to me, saying that he had attained samadhi. At that time I was with Maharaj at Kankhal, and I told him the substance of my friend's letter.

"Why!" exclaimed Maharaj: "I saw him about ten days ago. I looked into his eyes. He hasn't got samadhi. No doubt, he has had some kind of mystic vision — the vision of a light, perhaps — and he mistakes that for samadhi. An aspirant is often led astray like that, when he has no guru to advise him.

"Samadhi! Is it an easy matter to attain samadhi? We saw Swamiji in samadhi only a few times. Sri Ramakrishna alone was able to live in samadhi almost continuously, day and night."

Then he quoted a verse from the Upanishads: "When a man sees the Supreme Lord, the knots of the heart are cut asunder and all doubts cease to exist."

"Is it ever possible," I asked, "to attain samadhi after a short time?"

"Yes, if a man has lived an absolutely continent life."

Maharaj, with his deep insight, knew the

strength and weakness of each of his disciples. He was always ready to help, but he insisted that the disciples must also make an effort. Once, I asked him to free my mind from lust. "I could do that for you," he replied : " but then, my child, you would lose all the joy of struggle. Life would seem insipid."

Sri Ramakrishna himself sometimes rebuked his most intimate disciples, and Maharaj often used this method of training those who were near and dear to him. The chastening of a disciple never began, however, until after he had enjoyed several years of love and kind words. These experiences were painful at the time, but they were later treasured among the disciple's sweetest memories. And even while Maharaj was scolding him, he would feel a strange undercurrent of joy. The indifference of Maharaj was the only thing we could not have borne ; and Maharaj was never indifferent. The harsher his words, the more intensely we felt his interest in our welfare. The very fact that he could speak to us in this way proved that we were his children, his own. Sometimes, a disciple would be reproved for quite insignificant reasons, or on grounds that seemed to him utterly unjust. But, as time passed, he would realize that there had been

certain tendencies and karmas stored in his sub-conscious mind, and that Maharaj had seen them and was working to annihilate them before they could appear and become harmful. Thus, at the cost of a little unpleasantness, the disciple would be spared years of painful struggle and self-discipline.

There was only one occasion when I felt that I had perhaps lost my Master's love. I could not endure the thought. That night I decided to run away from the monastery and hide myself forever. With this resolve in my mind, I went next morning to prostrate before Maharaj, and silently take my leave of him. I was about to go, when he told me to sit down. For a while, he continued to scold me, reminding me of all my faults. Then, with a sudden change of manner and great earnestness, he asked : "Do you think you can run away from me ? The mother holds the child on her lap and spans him ; and the child cries, 'Mother, mother.' " Never before had I been so deeply aware of his love and protection. All thought of running away was forgotten. His words soothed my burning heart. Then he said : "Our love is so deep that we do not let you know how much we love you."

The truth of this statement was proved to

me, as I watched how Maharaj dealt with Hariharananda, another disciple who had been for many years his personal attendant. Hariharananda had begun to depend too much upon the Master ; he needed to learn to stand on his own feet. So, Maharaj, with a show of displeasure, sent him away to practise austerity in the solitude of a temple in Southern India. Some years later, Maharaj was in Madras and arranged for Hariharananda to visit him. I was alone with Maharaj throughout the entire evening on which his arrival was expected. He was as restless as a loving mother who was expecting her son after a long absence. At length, Hariharananda arrived, but, fearing that Maharaj was still angry with him, he felt shy and wanted to postpone their meeting until the morning. Knowing the real state of affairs, I insisted that he should see Maharaj at once. However, when Hariharananda came into the room, Maharaj no longer showed any sign of his loving anxiety. He merely greeted his disciple quietly and asked if he had been keeping well.

On another occasion, while I was being reproved in the presence of Ramlal Dada, the nephew of Sri Ramakrishna, another young disciple entered the room. Maharaj turned to

him and said jokingly : “ With those glasses on, you look like Keshab Sen.” The disciple did not answer, for he saw that I was being scolded. Then Ramlal Dada turned to him and said : “ Do you know why Maharaj is rebuking this boy in your presence ? There is a saying that the mother scolds her daughter in order to teach the daughter-in-law.”

I remember the first time Maharaj ever reproved me. I had failed to do a certain errand for him, because I had not understood exactly what it was he wanted. For this neglect, he scolded me throughout the afternoon. At supper time, Swami Turiyananda was seated with Maharaj and I was fanning them. The scolding continued. I remained silent. Swami Turiyananda turned to me and asked : “ Do you know why Maharaj is so hard on you ? ”

“ No,” I replied : “ frankly, I don’t. I do not see how I am to blame.”

Then Swami Turiyananda said : “ There are three classes of disciples. The third-class disciple merely does the guru’s bidding. The second-class disciple does not have to be told. He acts as soon as the thought arises in the guru’s mind. But the first-class disciple acts even before the guru has had time to think.

Maharaj wants you all to be first-class disciples.”

To this Maharaj added simply : “ You see, Brother Hari, I am getting old ; they don’t obey me any more. Please knock a little sense into their heads.”

Another time, I did not write to Maharaj because my vanity had been wounded. When he came to Madras from Bangalore and asked me why I had not written, I answered carelessly : “ Oh, you got all news of me from Swami Shivananda.”

At a glance, he understood my mood, and asked sarcastically : “ I suppose you have the key to the treasure-house inside you, and you don’t need me any more ? ” My ill humour vanished immediately. “ How can you say that ? ” I exclaimed : “ You know that you hold the key ! ”

There is a saying that in order to get honey from a honeycomb you must poke it. Maharaj once told me how Sri Ramakrishna, by his mere touch removed the spiritual obstacles that stood in his disciple’s path. To this I answered : “ Yes — Sri Ramakrishna did all that for *you*. But when our turn comes you can only scold us.”

Maharaj shook his head, and said with great

sweetness : “ No, my boy. You have no need to worry.” Then he repeated three times : “ I can see how Sri Ramakrishna is doing everything for you.”

After this, he began to speak of high spiritual matters. Swami Shivananda and many other monks of the Order were present. He continued to talk in this way for three hours, stopping only when he was told that a householder devotee wanted to see him. He remarked : “ Now I can't go on. My mind has come down to a lower level.” Later, Swami Shivananda said to me : “ Today I learned many things I had not known before — just because you poked the honeycomb of Maharaj.”

Sometimes the harsh behaviour of Maharaj toward a disciple amounted to apparent cruelty. Three of us were to be initiated into the monastic Order at the same time. One was a boy who had been greatly praised because he had steadfastly practised spiritual disciplines. We had all noticed his growth. Just as the formal rites were about to begin, Maharaj suddenly turned to this boy and said : “ Why are you here ? I shall not initiate you. Go away.”

My brother-disciple and I were both shock-

ed and felt that Maharaj had been cruel. But the boy himself later admitted that the praise he had received had made him vain, Maharaj, by his drastic action, had killed the seed which might have grown into deadly spiritual pride. For ten days he suffered bitterly. Then he also was initiated.

Maharaj also taught by joking and making fun. Often his humorous remarks contained a deep inner meaning. To one disciple he used to write doggerel verses, and the truths they expressed were sometimes far from pleasant. While in Madras, he used to dictate these poems to me. One of them had a line in it : " I have given that which is holy unto a dog." He told me to mail this poem to the disciple. Its harshness pained me and I spoke of it to Ramlal Dada, saying that I was afraid the feelings of the disciple would be deeply hurt. Ramlal Dada reported my remark to Maharaj. Meanwhile, I had gone to bed, but Maharaj sent for me. He told me to bring the poem and read it to him. I did so, and repeated my objection. Maharaj was silent for a moment. Then he said : " No, send it as it is. He is too thick-skinned to get my meaning any other way." And how right he was ! These verses made a deep impression upon the

disciple, and awakened his spiritual-understanding.

The reproaches of Maharaj were always followed by tenderness and sweetness. I still remember the last words he ever spoke to me. I was cooking a sweet for him and he was walking up and down, close by. He was about to leave Madras. Suddenly, he came over and whispered into my ear : "It makes me feel so bad, having to leave you. I shall miss you very much." Later, at the end of a letter, he repeated those same loving words : "I miss you very much."

"M," once told Vishwananda, a disciple of Maharaj : "Observe how Maharaj acts and you will have some idea of what Sri Ramakrishna was like. When his mind came down to the finite plane, his sense of humour was very keen." This was also true of Maharaj. One of his favourite jokes was to have some fruits or sweets placed beside a disciple who was meditating. When the disciple had finished his meditation, he would find his favourite dishes laid out before him. Later Maharaj would ask : "Well, did you get the fruits of your austerity ?"

Often, he would make us all roar with laughter. I remember once, while we were

laughing, he nudged me and said, pointing to Vishwananda : “Look ! He giggles like a girl !” Maharaj would sometimes remark : “It is good to laugh every day. It relaxes the body and the mind.”

The relationship between guru and disciple, according to the Hindu scriptures, is a very sacred one. Maharaj used to say that an enlightened soul must help his disciple until he also becomes enlightened. This tie cannot be broken by the death of the body. After the teacher has passed away, he still continues to watch over his disciples, in spirit. He will not accept his own liberation until all are liberated.

Maharaj was the embodiment of the protective power of the guru. Once, he was walking with another disciple and myself. He was slightly ahead of us. Suddenly we heard a shout : “Out of the way ! There’s a mad bull !” An instant later, we saw the bull itself, rushing toward us. There was no time to run. My brother-disciple and I tried to get in front of Maharaj, in order to protect him. But he raised his arms and pushed us back. Although he was now an elderly man, he was still extraordinarily strong. There was a moment’s pause, as the bull approached with lowered head, and Maharaj stood still, confronting it. Then the

bull stopped, shook its head from side to side, lifted it, and walked quietly away.

Swami Akhilananda relates a similar incident which took place at Bhubaneswar. Maharaj had gone for an evening walk in the woods with Akhilananda and another devotee. By the time they turned homeward, it was dark. Suddenly, they saw a tiger coming toward them. Maharaj stood still. The tiger also stopped, about a hundred feet away, and looked at them for some moments. Then it turned and ran off. Neither of the devotees felt frightened. There could never be any fear in the presence of Maharaj.

Maharaj prescribed various disciplines and diverse forms of worship to suit the different temperaments of his disciples. He knew our needs far better than we did. When I first joined the Order, I was inclined to the path of devotion ; but Maharaj decided to send me to a monastery in the Himalayas where the ideal of non-dualism is practised and no ritual is allowed. Before I left, he made me read aloud to him a book on extreme non-dualism. Two years later, he sent me to the monastery in Madras where ritual is regarded as very important. But now I had lost all my devotional inclination, and disbelieved in ritualistic

worship. After some time, Maharaj paid a visit to this monastery. One day, a devotee brought a large basket of nagalingam flowers to be offered in the worship. Knowing that they were the favourite flowers of Maharaj, I arranged them in his room. Maharaj came in, saw what I was doing, and asked : "Have you saved some of those flowers for the worship of the Lord ?"

"No, Maharaj," I replied. For I had thought to myself : "After all, the Lord in the shrine room is only a picture, but the Guru is the living God." Maharaj, as usual, read my thoughts, and asked : "Do you think it is merely a picture that is worshipped in the shrine ?"

"Yes," I replied, somewhat nervously.

"Have you ever performed the ritualistic worship ?"

"No, Maharaj."

"Why not ?"

"I am not yet a Swami, and I am not a Brahmin by caste. So I am not allowed to do the external worship in the shrine."

Maharaj became quite excited. "What is all this ?" he exclaimed. "Call Sharvananda."

Swami Sharvananda was a disciple of Maharaj and head of the Madras Monastery. When

he appeared, Maharaj asked him : “ How is it that a Brahmachari of this Order is not allowed to do the worship, just because he is not a Brahmin ? ”

Sharvananda answered : “ Swami Ramakrishnananda was the first head of this monastery. He was very particular that the worship should be performed only by a Swami or a Brahmin.”

“ It should not be that way,” Maharaj replied. “ Any one who has been initiated and who has entered the Order is purified in his body and birth. Therefore he should be allowed to do the worship.” Then, turning to me, he said : “ You will do the worship.”

“ But Maharaj,” I replied, “ I do not believe in ritualistic worship. I do not see the living Presence in the picture.”

“ I am asking you to do the worship now,” Maharaj said quietly. “ Will you ? ”

I obediently followed his instructions and, within a few days, became convinced of the great efficacy of external worship.

Almost his last advice to me was : “ Be ritualistic.” And he added : “ Look at Ambikananda (one of his senior disciples) ; see how wonderfully he is progressing through the practice of ritualism.”

This does not mean, however, that Maharaj asked everybody to practise ritualism. In fact, there are many of his disciples who have never learned the rites of formal worship. Hinduism teaches the value of ritual, but does not say that it is essential to everyone's spiritual progress.

In conclusion, I must mention two quotations which Maharaj never tired of repeating to his disciples. The first was : "Tell the truth, but never a harsh truth." The second was from the teachings of Sri Chaitanya : "Be humbler than a blade of grass, be patient and forbearing like the tree. Give honour to all ; take no honour to thyself. Chant the name of the Lord unceasingly."

HIS MYSTIC VISIONS

MAHARAJ once told me : “ There are times when it becomes impossible for me to teach any one. No matter where I look, I see only God, wearing many masks. Who am I, the teacher ? Who is to be taught ? But when my mind comes down to a lower level again, I see ignorance in man and try to remove it.”

Maharaj spent most of his later life in a state of high spiritual consciousness. He only came down from it in order to teach and help us. His awareness of God had become so habitual that he would experience mystical visions even while conscious of the external world around him. He rarely spoke of these visions, and when he did so, it was only to his brother-swamis or disciples. I shall record a few of them in this chapter.

It was the year 1901, a few days before the annual worship of Durga — God the Mother in Her aspect as Protectress of the Universe. Maharaj was sitting on the bank of the Ganges at the Belur Math. Suddenly he saw Mother

Durga walking on the surface of the Ganges toward the monastery grounds. She passed under the sacred vilwa tree in the monastery garden and then disappeared. A moment later Swamiji arrived by boat, came to Maharaj and said : “ Raja, make arrangements at once for the worship of Mother Durga.” Then he told Maharaj that he had a vision, and seen Mother Durga being worshipped at the monastery. Maharaj, in turn, described his own vision to Swamiji, and they began at once to prepare for the worship. Since that date the special worship of Mother Durga has been held every year at the Belur Monastery. Maharaj also performed this worship at the monasteries in Kankhal, Benares, and Madras. He once told Akhilananda that he performed this worship in obedience to the Mother’s direct command. Akhilananda records that, during the Durga Festival in Madras, the power of Maharaj was specially felt by his disciples, and their minds were raised to higher levels of spirituality.

Maharaj used to observe Christmas every year by offering special worship to Jesus. The story of the nativity was read aloud from the Bible and followed by meditation. Fruit, bread, cake and wine were offered in the worship.

Sister Devamata, an American devotee who happened to be present on one such occasion, records the scene as follows :

“When I had finished reading, the intense stillness in the air led me to look towards Swami Brahmananda. His eyes were open and fixed on the altar, there was a smile on his lips, but it was evident that his consciousness had gone to a higher plane. No one moved or spoke. At the end of twenty minutes or more, the look of immediate seeing returned to his eyes and he motioned to us to continue the service.”

After the service, as Maharaj was partaking of the sacramental food, he remarked to Sister Devamata : “While you were reading, Christ suddenly stood before the altar, dressed in a long blue cloak. He talked to me for some time. It was a very blessed moment.”

There is a saying in Sanskrit : “Places of pilgrimage are made holy by the visits of the seers of God.” The enlightened soul does not need to visit holy places or temples, for he has realized the living God everywhere. Wherever he lives, that place becomes holy. Nevertheless, we know that enlightened men often journey to shrines and temples. They do so because they find there a greater manifestation

of God — a more concentrated revelation, as it were. This spiritual concentration has been caused by the visits of many holy men and women and by the devotion of pilgrims throughout the ages. When a saint goes to a holy place, he contributes his own revelation to the spiritual treasure-house, for the benefit of the generations that will follow.

The temples of India are dedicated to deities, of many forms and aspects, as well as to the Impersonal, Formless Godhead. This one Godhead, Whose name is Silence, comprises all divine forms and aspects, yet is beyond form and definition. Sri Ramakrishna used to say : “Never set any limit to the Infinite by trying to define It.” And indeed, it is evident that Infinite God must have infinite forms of expression. “Truth is one, sages call It by various names,” says the Rig Veda, the ancient scripture of the Hindus.

In an orchestra, different instruments play different notes. But these notes harmonize and the combined effect is of one beautiful unity. Maharaj reached this unity through his realization of Brahman. An ordinary mystic may be aware of only one instrument and hear only one note — one part or aspect of the divine whole. The illumined

soul, however, hears all the instruments, the entire orchestra. Thus it was that Maharaj, while ever conscious of the one Brahman, was able to see the many divine aspects when he visited the temples dedicated to them.

At Madura, in Southern India, there is a famous temple of Divine Mother. When Maharaj entered it and stood before the deity, he exclaimed : “ Mother, Mother ! ” and lost his external consciousness. Swami Ramakrishnanda, who was with him, saw his condition and held him by the arms to prevent him from falling. Seeing Maharaj standing unconscious in ecstasy, the priests and devotees who were present gazed at him in silence. The temple was filled with an intense stillness, which prevailed for an hour or more. Then Maharaj went silently away. Later he described how he had seen the luminous form of Divine Mother. At the Temple of Rameshwar, which is dedicated to Shiva, the formless aspect of God, Maharaj was again absorbed in samadhi. Even when he returned to normal consciousness, he remained for some time in a state of ecstatic joy.

The temple at Cape Comorin is dedicated to Divine Mother in the form of a little girl. Maharaj lived there for several days. Some-

times he would stand motionless before the deity in silence. Then he would become ecstatic and begin to talk to the Divine Mother. Whenever he entered this temple, he lost all external consciousness. In the temple of Vishnu at Tirupati in Southern India, Maharaj had a strange experience. The vision he beheld there was not of Vishnu, but of Divine Mother. On inquiry it was found that the temple had once been dedicated to Mother, and later had been changed into a Vishnu temple through the influence of Ramanuja.

In the temple of Jagannath at Puri, there are three images. Sri Krishna stands on one side, his brother, Balaram, on the other, and Subhadra, his sister, stands in the middle. Here Maharaj once saw the living Krishna on the altar; the three images had disappeared. Maharaj visited this temple many times. Whenever he was there, he seemed to dwell in another realm, and his face shone with a heavenly smile.

Of the many places of pilgrimage, Maharaj loved Brindaban and Benares most of all. He used to tell us that in these two cities, a spiritual current is always flowing, and that this current grows particularly strong at certain times of the day and night. He said that if a

man meditates and practises japam in Brindaban at midnight, he will be greatly helped by this spiritual current, and if he meditates in Benares at 4 a.m., he may easily become absorbed into the higher consciousness. In later years when Maharaj visited the temples at Brindaban and Benares, he would ask his disciples to sing and chant in chorus and he himself would pass into ecstasy.

Speaking of Benares, he said : " Many have found enlightenment there. If the aspirant struggles a little to reach union with God, he may get it very easily. Only once did Maharaj initiate a disciple in Benares. After that he always refused to do so, because, as he said : " Lord Shiva gives liberation to all those who live and die here." The disciple, who later became Swami Akhilananda, was once in Benares with Maharaj and wanted initiation. " Holy Mother does not initiate any disciple in Benares," Maharaj told him. " I have made the same rule." Then in a sweet affectionate voice he added : " I will initiate you when I go back to the monastery at Belur. Don't be impatient. In my mind I have already accepted you as my disciple, and have made myself responsible for you."

Once, during the celebration of Sri Rama-

krishna's birthday at Belur, while the disciples were singing and chanting, Maharaj went into samadhi. He was carried to his room, completely unconscious of the outer world, his face shining with a heavenly radiance. He remained in this condition so long that his brother-disciples became anxious. They told Holy Mother, who was present in the monastery for the celebration. She showed no anxiety but seemed well pleased. "Do not worry on his account," she replied. Then she went to Maharaj, touched his arm lightly and said in an affectionate voice : "Rakhal, I have brought sacramental food for you. Eat, my child." Maharaj immediately returned to normal consciousness and seeing Holy Mother prostrated himself at her feet.

He used to say : "It is very hard to understand Mother's greatness, unless she herself reveals it. Through the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, one may recognize the Divine Mother in her."

Once, while Maharaj was visiting Holy Mother, a woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna asked him : "Rakhal, Mother wanted to know from you why a spiritual aspirant must worship the Divine Mother first." Maharaj answered : "Mother has the key to knowledge

of Brahman. Unless She shows Her grace and opens the door, no one can enter into the realm of Brahman."

As he left the house where Holy Mother was staying, Maharaj began to sing and dance, clapping his hands, like a little boy. Whenever he was with Holy Mother, he always acted in this childlike manner, which expressed the relationship between them.

Vijnanananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, said of Maharaj and his visions : "The gods and goddesses are real, not myths. They are the many aspects of the one Godhead and I know this because Maharaj used to see and talk to them."

Once Akhilananda, who was then a very young boy, was told by Swami Vijnanananda that, when he saw Maharaj, he was to say : "There is something within me that needs awakening—please give me your help." Akhilananda repeated these words to Maharaj, who replied : "Why didn't you ask Vijnanananda to do this awakening for you ?" Akhilananda answered that he had, but that Swami Vijnanananda had said : "I have very little spiritual power within me, but Maharaj lives in the powerhouse. He can easily do what you ask." Maharaj looked very serious and

said : " Yes, the awakening will come. Don't be impatient. For this awakening one needs initiation."

" Then please initiate me."

" That will be done," Maharaj promised.

To quote Akhilananda's own words : " Maharaj made us feel that spiritual awakening and God-realization are not difficult to achieve. He made us understand that tremendous help will be given us if only we will struggle a little and that we shall easily reach the goal."

Maharaj had the vision of Sri Ramakrishna, not occasionally, but every day of his later life. He used to tell me : " I see Sri Ramakrishna every day and talk to him." To another disciple, he said : " I see Sri Ramakrishna whenever he chooses to reveal himself to me. By his grace, you will also see him and talk to him."

Although Maharaj lived almost continuously in a high state of consciousness, he was very natural and human in his behaviour. Sri Ramakrishna said of him in his early twenties : " Rakhal is like the kind of mango which still looks green outside when it is ripe and sweet within." This was true of Maharaj throughout his life. Whenever possible he would hide his

ecstatic mood and act in the most normal way. I have already mentioned his keen sense of humour. Balaram's wife once dreamt that she was feeding Maharaj. Taking this for an omen, she invited him to a sumptuous feast which she herself cooked. When Maharaj had enjoyed the dinner, he turned to her grandson and said : " Tell your grandma to dream more frequently."

On another occasion, a devotee came to take Maharaj to his home in a Rolls Royce car. Maharaj enjoyed the ride very much, and when it was over, he remarked : " In future my motto will be—Rolls Royce or walk."

His love of gardening has been referred to in an earlier chapter. At every monastery he visited, the laying out of the garden was assisted by his expert advice. He would often gaze at the blossoming flowers and remark : " Look ! There you see the worship of God in His universal form going on unceasingly."

Many of his householder disciples came to him with their worldly troubles and problems. Maharaj would not only listen to them sympathetically but also give them constructive advice. Successful doctors, lawyers, engineers and other professional men found that Maharaj was capable of discussing their work intelli-

gently with them. They would be surprised to find that he had given them a new angle of approach to their respective jobs.

Even though he was interested in everything and in all the events of his time, his intimate disciples could see, that beneath this apparent interest, Maharaj always remained completely detached. The things of this world rolled off him like drops of water off a lotus leaf.

HIS PASSING AWAY

I HAVE already described how Sri Ramakrishna saw Rakhal dancing with Sri Krishna on a mystic lotus, shortly before the boy's first visit to Dakshineswar. Only a few intimate disciples knew of this vision, and Sri Ramakrishna had warned them never to reveal it to Maharaj, explaining that if he realized his true nature as the Eternal Companion of Krishna, he would leave his mortal body. The secret had therefore been very carefully guarded.

In March, 1922, Maharaj went to Calcutta to stay for some time at the home of Balaram. Balaram himself had already passed away, but his whole family were sincere devotees of Ramakrishna, and his palatial guest-house was at the disposal of all the Swamis and disciples of the Order. It is now regarded as a place of pilgrimage, sanctified by the presence of so many holy men.

While Maharaj was at the guest-house, Ramlal Dada came to visit him. Ramlal Dada was a pure soul and a devotee of a very high

order. During Ramakrishna's lifetime, he had been one of the Master's personal attendants and had served him with great devotion. Whenever he and Maharaj were together, their talk naturally turned to the early days. They would laugh and joke together, for they stimulated each other's sense of fun. One day, Maharaj asked Ramlal Dada to sing for him the songs he used to sing to Ramakrishna. It was arranged that many disciples and devotees should be present to hear the singing.

Ramlal Dada began to sing songs about Krishna and the shepherds and shepherdesses of Brindaban. At first, everyone was very gay as Ramlal mimicked the gestures of the shepherdesses, making his audience laugh. Suddenly, Maharaj, who had also been enjoying the fun, became serious. Ramlal Dada was singing : "Come back, O Krishna, come back to Brindaban. Come and reign in the hearts of your beloved shepherds and shepherdesses. Don't forget that you are a shepherd yourself." At that moment Maharaj seemed transported to a realm beyond this earth. The joking and laughter stopped. The atmosphere became calm and serene. Perhaps, at this moment, Maharaj received a partial glimpse of his true nature, and knew himself to be God's

Eternal Companion. The events that followed seem to point to some such revelation.

A few days later, at midnight, Nirvanananda, a disciple and personal attendant of Maharaj, saw his master sitting upon his bed in a very earnest mood. The disciple stood silently before him, waiting for him to speak. Maharaj looked at him, and said : " I woke suddenly and saw Sri Ramakrishna standing just there." He pointed to a spot in front of a couch, adding : " He didn't speak to me. He stood there silently for a while and then disappeared. I don't understand it."

After a few moments Maharaj continued in a low, earnest voice : " I can't give my mind to the things of this world any longer. It wants to take complete refuge in Him and Him alone."

Shortly after this, the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna was celebrated. Maharaj stayed at the Belur Math for the occasion ; then he returned to Balaram's house in Calcutta. Two days later he had a slight attack of cholera, but recovered within a week. This illness which left him feeble was followed by diabetes, which took a serious turn. A number of doctors came to treat him, one of whom wore the religious mark on his forehead.

“Doctor,” said Maharaj, “the Lord Shiva, whose symbol you wear on your forehead, is the only Reality. Everything else is unreal.”

A devotee asked : “Maharaj, are you suffering very greatly ? ”

“Please try to realize,” Maharaj answered, “that in my condition I have to bear all physical suffering patiently and without complaint.” But as he said this, his face seemed to light up with a divine radiance. The pain appeared to have melted away. He lost external consciousness and became absorbed in meditation.

About nine o'clock that same evening, he placed his hand on Nirvanananda, and said : “Don't worry. You have served me well. You shall be merged in God and reach knowledge of Brahman. I give you my blessing that you may attain this.”

Then he called all the disciples and devotees who were present to his side. For each he had a blessing and an affectionate word.

“Ah, my children,” he told them tenderly : “never forget God, and you will realize the highest good. Don't grieve. I shall be with you always.”

Once more he became absorbed in his transcendental vision. After some time had passed, he continued in a sweet, tender voice : “I am

floating, I am floating on the leaf of faith and knowledge on the ocean of Brahman. Then suddenly he exclaimed : “ Ah ! The feet of Sri Ramakrishna—I know them ! Viveka, my brother Vivekananda ! Premananda . . . Yogananda . . . ”

Thus, with his divine sight, he recognized the brother-disciples who had passed away. He was dwelling in that transcendental realm where he had lived throughout his life ; but now he no longer concealed the fact. He began to describe his visions.

“ Ah,” he murmured softly, “ the blissful ocean of Brahman ! Om ! Salutations to the Supreme Brahman ! Om ! Salutations to the Supreme Atman ! ”

While he was speaking of his divine experiences, his throat seemed to become dry. A disciple said to him : “ Maharaj, please drink this water. It has lemon in it.”

“ The mind doesn’t want to come down from Brahman,” said Maharaj slowly : “ Pour Brahman into Brahman.” Like a child, he opened his mouth for the water to be poured into it.

Then he turned to Swami Saradananda and said : “ Brother, Sri Ramakrishna is real. His divine incarnation is real.”

After this, Maharaj was silent for a while. His face wore an expression of great sweetness. He was deeply absorbed in meditation. The minds of those who were present were so uplifted that they felt no grief—only joy and silent calm. All sense of the world and of death was lost.

Suddenly, in the midst of the silence, the voice of Maharaj was heard : “ Ah, that inexpressible light ! Ramakrishna, the Krishna of my Ramakrishna I am the shepherd boy. Put anklets on my feet, I want to dance with Krishna. I want to hold His hands—the little boy Krishna Ah, Krishna, my Krishna, You have come ! Krishna Krishna Can’t you see Him ? Haven’t you eyes to see ? Oh, how beautiful ! My Krishna on the lotus eternal the Sweet One !

“ My play is over now. Look ! The child Krishna is caressing me. He is calling me to come away with Him ! I am coming ”

The tenderness and heavenly compassion that filled his heart were expressed in every word he uttered. The whole atmosphere of the large hall where he was lying seemed to vibrate with this emotion. No one can describe the extraordinary sense of holiness which was created by his presence. Everyone felt that the

fateful hour was approaching, and that Maharaj was taking his final leave of them.

During the early hours of the morning, he remained silent for some time, and fell into a slumber. At seven o'clock he awoke, and was again possessed by this high spiritual mood. He called the few disciples who had just arrived, and had not been present the previous night. To each he gave his blessing, bestowing comfort and fearlessness.

Two more days passed, and another night came on. By this time his life was despaired of, and gloom fell upon all. His physical condition grew worse and worse. The doctors were amazed that Maharaj had not passed into coma days before, as is usual in this kind of illness. But such was the power and spirituality of his mind, so completely was it freed from the meshes of physical matter, that it remained unaffected by the condition of his suffering body. He maintained perfect consciousness right up to the last moment of his life.

As that last evening faded into night, his chest suddenly heaved. It was as if a great wave of breath passed up the body to the throat. His half-closed eyes opened, and fixed their gaze upon the distance, brilliant and unspeakably beautiful. Thus it was that, on

April 10th, 1922, the life left his body.

“Don’t grieve. I shall be with you always.” Those were his last words to his disciples. After his passing away, we all felt that Maharaj was intensely present within us. He was closer to us than ever before.

More than twenty years have gone by since that day, and every disciple can bear witness that Maharaj still lives, protects and guides him onward towards the goal.

When I was about to leave India and take up my duties in the United States, Swami Shivananda said these memorable parting words : “Never forget that you have seen the Son of God. You have seen God.”

