

THE MAKING OF A DEVOTEE

Swami Vidyatmananda (John Yale)

Ramakrishna Order of India

"As the different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea, so O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

--Hymn on the Greatness of Shiva

CONTENTS

- [Introduction](#)
 - [Chapter One: The Devotee as Historical Incident](#)
 - [Two: The Devotee as Inquirer after Truth](#)
 - [Three: The Devotee as Psycho-Physical Being](#)
 - [Four: The Devotee as Disciple](#)
 - [Five: The Devotee as Literary Enthusiast](#)
 - [Six: The Devotee as Friend of Vivekananda](#)
 - [Seven: The Devotee as Admirer of Sri Ramakrishna](#)
 - [Eight: The Devotee as Sadhu](#)
 - [Nine: The Devotee as Passenger to India and More](#)
 - [Ten: The Devotee as "Manager Maharaj"](#)
 - [Eleven: The Devotee as Aide to a Holy Man](#)
 - [Twelve: The Devotee as Witness to Evidences of the Faith](#)
 - [Epilogue](#)
-
-
-

Introduction

I have lived during a period when began, and participated in, the early stages of a noteworthy religious development. I had thought of titling this book *The Story of a Third-Generation Disciple*. That is my situation. Sri Ramakrishna lived from 1836 to 1886. Millions of people now consider him an avatar--an incarnation of God of the same order as Jesus or Sri Krishna or Gotama Buddha--a savior for his age. The influence of Sri Ramakrishna expressed itself through his several disciples. The most famous of these was Swami Vivekananda. Another was Swami Brahmananda. My guru, Swami Prabhavananda, was a disciple of Swami Brahmananda; I may thus consider myself to be a spiritual great-grandson of Sri Ramakrishna. I have met many other spiritual descendants of Sri Ramakrishna and of Sri Ramakrishna's wife, Sri Sarada Devi--disciples of direct disciples of the former and direct disciples of the latter--together with disciples of their disciples, often of western origin.

I find thus that I occupy a strategic position in relation to the early manifestation of the Ramakrishna movement. What I saw, what I learned, what I experienced ought not be lost in the trackless wastes of receding time. Nor the effect of these contacts on one who experienced them. I have hoped that *The Making of a Devotee*, although hardly a typical work of piety, might possess enough edifying value to make its publication worth while.

I have had to use a great many "I's" throughout this narrative. But I believe it to be not so much the "I" of a self-important autobiographer which speaks, but that of a bemused observer and entranced witness. It is the "I" of an experiencer caught up in events which seemed so significant that he became convinced that it would be an error not to take the bold step of offering to publish what he had written.

In September, 1992, I reviewed the manuscript of *The Making of a Devotee*. A month or two before, I had asked Swami Gahanananda, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, who was visiting European Vedanta centers, what the attitude of the Order would be to a work of autobiography written by one of its sanyasin members. The Swami replied that the work should be reviewed at the Order's Headquarters before publication, and if published should be considered as being the property of the Order. And that the author should remain in the background, the graces experienced by the autobiographer occupying primary importance. And that the book, if considered acceptable, should be published by an official branch of the Order (not a commercial publisher as I had thought perhaps preferable) so as to avoid any idea that the work was brought out clandestinely.

I agree perfectly with the stipulations of the General Secretary. But the book I have authored cannot conform to them in entirety. The autobiographer (the Devotee of the title) is very much in the forefront; indeed it is the transformation of the author from a worldly know-it-all to devotee which constitutes the theme and substance of the work. There may be problems, hence, in acceptance of *The Making of a Devotee* for publication.

So I have concluded that--barring a miraculous insistence from the Order that the book be published

during my lifetime--the proper procedure is to leave the finished manuscript among my effects and let posthumous judgment prevail. My death will guarantee that the proviso of the General Secretary that the autobiographer should occupy a background position will in that case certainly be met.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter One

The Devotee as Historical Incident

1.

Psychologists like Carl Jung give great importance to dreams as an aid to therapy. He saw dreams as a means of tapping the contents of the unconscious and receiving useful indications from this body of wisdom generally mute. Such indications, properly interpreted, may help an individual understand the cause of his problems and show him how to combat it. In his book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Jung cites numerous examples of this process drawn from his own experience.

Aside from psychiatric practice, it seems clear that everyone engages in this process to some extent. A dream of flying will perhaps alert an individual of a suppressed longing to be free from daily cares. Finding himself in strange places may give a hint that a respite from everyday routines is in order. Dreams in which an individual finds himself caught in frustrating situations will encourage him to seek in his waking hours a more healthy pattern of life. Most of these dreams would seem merely to project a picture--reconstituted--of the concerns of the waking day.

Such dreams come and go, generally leaving little lasting impression. But very occasionally a dream will make its appearance which proclaims itself more of a vision than a mere dream. Such dreams are extremely vivid and continue to leave a lasting impression.

Somewhere about 1940, enthusiastically committed to a worldly life, but feeling guilty about it, I had such a dream. It was self-certifying as being more than a dream; it seemed to proclaim that it carried a serious message meant especially for me. I took it as a kind of prophesy; and have recollected it in all its details all these fifty years, as I do today.

I was in a room something like a chapel. Seated before me on a stone platform was an angel. Dressed in blue, yes, and with wings! The angel was holding a small closed casque. I sensed that this somehow pertained to me. "Please tell me, what is in the casque," I enquired. The angel smiled and replied, "You will know when you get to heaven." That was all. Rising, casque in hand, the angel disappeared through a door at the back of the room. I waited there, disappointed and yet happy and relieved.

For now I knew, by implication, that, far from God as I was at that moment, I should eventually modify my life--be witness to a change of heart--and achieve "salvation". Not if you get to heaven, as I had feared, but when you get to heaven.

This vision has sustained me all these years. I claim the promise that I shall see the angel again. That winged being must be there to greet me on my departure from this life and keep his promise. What the casque when opened will reveal I do not know, but the fact that it shall be opened in heaven's unblinking

light has given me cause to carry on with confidence all these years.

2.

I was born in 1913. (I can still remember, when five years old, the sound of factory whistles saluting the end of World War I.) On that hot day of July 29, 1913, my mother had gone to a morning Chautauqua entertainment held in a circus tent in the city park of Lansing, Michigan. They say that, being a large woman, Mother hardly showed that she was pregnant, and anyway her term still had time to go. But during the performance she began to experience labor pains. Alarmed, she started to walk home--a good couple of miles. When proceeding on foot became impossible she flagged down a man driving a horse and wagon, who brought her home. I was born that evening at 23h. 45, a month prematurely. I am told my body was somewhat unfinished; the nails were not fully formed; eyebrows had yet to appear, and there were one or two other imperfections.

My father was a dentist. and our life was comfortable. We lived in a big house set on an acre of land, just beyond the city limits. We always had good food, adequate clothing. We spent Christmastime at my grandmother's house in southwestern Michigan with my aunts and uncles and cousins; and we passed the summer at a cottage at Cedarville in Michigan's Upper Penninsula near where Lake Huron and Lake Michigan join at the Straits of Mackinaw.

My parents were religiously strict, but possibly no stricter than many at that epoch. Both were what we would call today born-again Christians. They tried to inculcate in my sister Elizabeth, five years my junior, and in me the traditional Protestant virtues.

Father was what we might think of as a typical New Englander. His character resembled that of his own father, who as a young doctor had come to the midwest from Vermont. Father's apparent coldness concealed what I later was to understand was an ardent nature. He rarely expressed his feelings, but people respected him as, though not easy to know, a good man. He was fond of the outdoors. He liked to hunt, camp, go on boat trips. Needless to say, I was a disappointment to him; I preferred books. I agreed once to go with him to northern Michigan on a deer hunting expedition. Slogging around in the woods, gun at the ready, in the hope of spotting a deer; feet wetted by the slushy snow, tripping over fallen limbs, sleeping in a tent heated by a smokey fire--such hearty delights were not for me. Father was strongly individualist. For example, he used to read the daily newspaper perched on a bicycle going to and from his office. He was very much interested in what was called the British-Israel thought--prophecies based on symbols said to be found in the Great Pyramid. Like many sons before me, I wish, now that it is too late, that I had been mature enough to appreciate my father's qualities and to have developed a friendship with him.

Mother was a worrystore woman and often sickly. She said frequently that she should never have married, "although of course if I hadn't married I wouldn't have had you, dear." She didn't really like my father, complained against him to us children, and spoke, up to her last days, of having "disobeyed the Lord" in having married instead of having become a Christian missionary to India. Elizabeth identified

with my father, whom she saw as misunderstood, and I identified with my mother, who seemed to me to be the partner who deserved understanding.

My father and mother were conscientious parents; it is probably due to their efforts to rear us in a wholesome fashion that I owe the good health I have enjoyed all my life. Yet I was an alien child in our family. I never felt very comfortable with my parents, and I am sure that they were correspondingly ill at ease with me. Somewhere around the age of ten or twelve a first metaphysical challenge rose in my mind when, furious at some scolding my father administered, I sought to punish him: "You are to blame. You brought me into the world. I didn't ask to be born." I can still recall the injured look on his face. Much later I was ashamed of this outcry when I learned that the possession of a human body is one of the greatest to be desired of blessings. I have often asked myself what karmic predisposition caused me to be born into the union of Elizabeth Enma Richards and Edwin Laurence Yale, and what karmic deserts on their part ordained that they should be "blessed" with such an unsatisfactory son.

I was a conscientious boy, never very boistrous. A desire to excell was strong in me from the beginning, so that I became a model student. Never much for sports except swimming, as soon as I reached high school I threw my energy into such extracurricular activities as essay contests, poetry reading competitions, and dramatics.

What I would call the first awakening happened like this, when I was seventeen. On the bulletin board of Eastern High School there appeared an announcement stating that the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay would read her poetry in our auditorium on a certain evening. I admired Shelley, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson, but Millay was my ideal. The evening is clear in my memory. (I have the torn-off half of the admission ticket still.)

The stage, which I knew so well from having acted in plays there, had been turned into a drawing room, with a sofa, an easy chair or two, and a table, on which the Millay volumes of poetry were placed, the whole made glamorous in my eyes by the presence of a handsome arrangement of fresh flowers. The audience was not large but that was all the better; she was there mostly, I felt, for me.

When she came in, a live poet, who looked like a poet, I knew I was about to take some evolutionary step, or join some host of special people, or accede to some initiation. In 1930 Edna St. Vincent Millay would have been a little under forty. She was slender, had a boyish face, had red-gold hair worn in what we later were to call a page-boy style. She wore a long dress, gold in color, with reddish designs, draped in a sort of medieval fashion. But I saw this not as an evening gown but as the sacred vestment of a priestess. Something far beyond anything I had ever felt or seen was present in our dull midwestern city that night. A light was about to go on inside me.

She picked up one of the volumes, but without really reading from it began to recite the poems it contained in a voice profound and sweet. I had read most of the poems she recited, and some of them I even knew by heart. I entered into a state of exaltation that I hadn't known existed. I remember that at one point, reaching for a certain volume, she nearly upset the bouquet; the aplomb with which she righted the flowers and went serenely on thrilled me. How superbly different from the way I'd have

reacted in the same situation! As I cornily perceived the situation, I was a clod and she was a princess; to be her vassal would be my true vocation.

I went up afterward, shy but excited, to meet her. Her photo, cut from one of the posters which had announced her coming, found its place on the wall of my room. I daily performed what I would later know as puja before it. From now on I was going to be a Special Person, which meant, according to my lights of that epoch, a poet.

And poet I did become. For a year or two afterwards, with a dexterity which astonishes me now, I composed, rather after the style of T.S. Eliot, verse after verse. The mature man of today finds some of these compositions, written by a young stranger he cannot imagine ever having been, surprisingly moving.

And so the dispositions began which were to thrust me toward what I have become now. In some book about Shelley, probably AndrĚ Maurois's Ariel, I had been impressed by a photo of the poet wearing a shirt with a wide collar from which hung a flowing scarf tied in a loose knot something like a sailor's bow. This was what men poets wore. With some effort I assembled the necessary items for my own use. I even wore this outfit on the street till shamed into getting rid of it by hoots of derision from crude contemporaries. But I not only identified with the way Shelly looked; I identified with the way I imagined he had felt: life is tragic; and the way he was said to have thought: Christianity is non-liberating. But art can transcend the ordinary.

3.

I not only wanted to be; I wanted also to avoid. The Methodist church our family attended on Wednesday night for prayer meeting and often twice on Sunday was Oh so dull. The minister's name was Reverend Laity; what a funny name for a member of the clergy! He wore a wig, and this was a subject for intense speculation on the part of my sister and me. We had heard that wigs sometimes slipped about on the head, or maybe indeed remained inside gentlemen's hats when they doffed them for politeness's sake. Sitting there in our pew, bored to death, my sister and I centered our attention more on such a hoped-for disaster than on anything the pastor said.

There was on Sunday morning, before the sermon, what was called a class meeting, or testimony service. This was attended mostly by the old-timers, but I was expected to be present with my parents. The class was directed by a severe old man named Mr. Wilcox. He would start off by relating how the Lord had helped him during the past week, or by reproclaiming his faith in God. One by one the others would stand up and give their testimonies. I waited in agony for my turn to come, or to be called on. For I had absolutely nothing to say. I spent the time while the others were speaking rehearsing in my mind my very small speech, then eventually rose and stammered it out, feeling resentful and insincere, despite the "Amen" someone would usually utter as I finished and sat down.

Of course we studied the Bible intensely. I was not at all attracted by the carryings-on related in the Old

Testament. The Chosen People seemed immensely unstable and quarrelsome and their prophets oddly crude. Jesus was of course much more attractive, but I could never come to grips with what he must have been like. I resented the mawkishness of the colored pictures handed out at Sunday School. The only representation of Jesus I really liked and still recall in every detail was portrayed on one of the stained glass windows of the church auditorium. Jesus, wearing a crimson robe with a turnback inner lining which glowed white when the sun shone through the glass, was kneeling in prayer before what appeared to be a large flat rock or possibly tree stump. His hands were clasped before him and his eyes directed upward. He looked earnest, almost real, and likeable. I loved him and have always loved him. (That window is still there; I saw it again in 1987 on a short trip to Lansing. But now Reverend Laity's parsonage beside the church has vanished in favor of a parking lot, and the structure itself has been renamed the Bethel Baptist Church.)

Eventually Reverend Laity was replaced by a young modernist. His sermons reflected his interest in the then revolutionary Higher Criticism. In other words, he was intent on demystifying Christianity. This so outraged my parents that they formed a dissident group with other like-thinking members and resigned from the First Methodist Church of Lansing, to form a Nazarene chapel not far from our home. The Nazarenes were more exciting than the Methodists, but for me very low-class.

I am astonished that I sensed even at that stage that what we were taught was mostly kindergarten stuff. Concerning religion as preached at the North Street Church of the Nazarene, like later on concerning romance, my instinct asked: Is this all? It should have been more than that.

I can understand why teenagers commit suicide. Something opens, some perception clears, and you see the world as it is, people as they are, religion as less than it should be, and you are appalled to think that you must be a part of a world consisting of such elements for years and years to come.

One day I shouted out at my mother that feeling. I must have been about seventeen. We were in the kitchen, and she stopped doing what she was doing and just looked at me. "I don't want to grow up and get old and be just like everybody else," I cried. "Like you and Father and the church people and everybody else." Mother looked stricken. "There must be something else, some better way. I want to be, to be, a poet." Then a sudden inspiration: "Or a monk."

"O my dear," Mother replied. That's all she replied: "O my dear." Perhaps she too had once entertained such "intimations of immortality"---or repugnance for mortality. She repeated the bit about not being a missionary so often that I caught glimpses of the chinks in a relationship my parents did their best to keep intact for the sake of us children, and despair over the way her life had gone or was going.

4.

I early learned about hypocrisy, and the knowledge devastated me. I don't think today I could call anyone a hypocrite; I have experienced so many temptations to be untrue to my ideal that I realize people don't "fall" because they want to or intend to; it is mischance or a flareup of dormant karma

which takes over in spite of one's best intentions. Nobody deliberately betrays his ideals. But the young do their photographing in stark black and white.

A trite story. The pastor of the church my parents had helped to found was said to be having an affair with a woman of the parish who was not his wife. I turned the humiliation I felt into spitefulness by writing a short story about a famous woman evangelist who gets so worked up by the carnality she loves to denounce that she is tempted into committing that very act of carnality herself, and does so. This was the first of my indiscretions as a writer. My parents were of course indignant when I proudly showed them my story.

I have attended enough evangelistic services and viewed a sufficiency of holy-roller goings-on so as to feel that what occurs in them has a very close relation to the sexuality whose condemnation is their constant theme. Is it not always so whenever any form of fanaticism is practiced? The fault condemned will become the fault the one condemning it is most likely to fall prey to. Why? Because one is concentrating intensely on that fault, and what one concentrates on one interjects and eventually manifests.

When some time later the facts concerning AimŽe Semple MacPherson's randy personal life became known, I saw my work of youthful fiction about the lady evangelist a subtler and truer depiction than I had dared to believe at the time when I wrote it.

5.

As I learned about hypocrisy, I learned also about sorrow. Father's family had been in the United States for generations, but my grandfather on my mother's side at age twenty-one had emigrated to America from Cornwall. Eager to meet her father's English family, his eldest daughter Jane Richards (who was to become my favorite aunt) made a trip to Cornwall in 1911. There she met and fell in love with a first cousin named Julian Pascoe, several years younger than she.

The two corresponded ardently and Aunt Jane began to have reason to expect that the relationship would lead to marriage. She revisited Cornwall in the summer of 1914. That was hardly the moment to fix on a marriage; nevertheless she and Julian became engaged. Julian was already in uniform. The ship bringing Aunt Jane back to the United States at the end of that famous summer was accosted by a German submarine.

His experiences in the war, the fact that Jane was older than he, and anxiety that marrying a first cousin might produce abnormality in the children the two might produce caused Julian to have second thoughts. At the war's end he gently withdrew from the engagement and married a local girl. In the final letter of their correspondance Julian expressed this decision to Aunt Jane, begging her to understand.

Now ensued a scene which I did not witness but which I heard described by my grandmother. Aunt Jane went out to the back yard and lighted a bonfire into which, one by one, she dropped Julian's letters, she

standing over the fire with tears pouring down her face until the last page had been consumed.

I could see the scene and understand what Aunt Jane must have felt. The love I bore her was mingled with a sort of awe, an awe for one who had known and lost a great love. I resolved to meet Julian some day, and I did so on my first trip abroad in 1936. I could see that he had been right. By then Aunt Jane was clearly an old woman, whereas Julian was of robust middle age. This made the sorrow I felt even more intense. Why should life be like that? And a peculiar aspect of the story is that--whether due to some deficiency on her part or his, I never knew--Julian never succeeded in producing any child with his English wife. And this, it seemed to me, intensified the tragedy, by adding to sorrow the possibility of regret.

6.

When I finished high school in 1931 I had entertained the idea of going to Yale College and studying architecture. My tenth-grade "Career Book" was on the subject of architecture, and I remember that the cover featured a structure in the form of a big capital A resembling what we were later to know as an A-frame house. I wrote to Yale citing a rumor I'd heard that first sons of Yales could attend that university tuition free, and received a reply from New Haven in faraway Connecticut stating that no one there had ever heard of such a provision. Well, it was the Depression and I didn't insist--and Michigan State College was only a few miles from our home.

But my conscientious parents felt that it would be good for me to have the experience of living for a while away from home; so I was enrolled in what was felt to be the "wholesome atmosphere" of Olivet College, a Nazarene co-educational institution located in Central Illinois not far from Danville.

Olivet, Illinois, was an absolute nowhere--one three-story building set back from the state highway, surrounded by cornfields. No beauty, no evidence of culture, just a barren building which felt like an orphanage or correctional institution. It was T-shaped, with the top of the T fronting on the ill-maintained front yard (the school rooms and women's dormitory were here). The supporting member of the T, facing an endless prospect of agriculture, was inhabited by the boys.

In Olivet I became as disobedient as in high school I had been obedient. I wandered off by myself and bought cigarettes, which I smoked in the one picturesque setting I could find, the bank of a nearby meandering stream. Once or twice I hitchhiked to Danville--a big thrill--and even made it to Winnetka, north of Chicago, to spend a week end with my Aunt May, Uncle Harry, and Cousin Mary Jane.

Intrigued by Abraham Lincoln, I went for a week end to his old home and burial place in Springfield, Illinois, putting up in an inexpensive hotel. It is here that I saw my first movie (we were not allowed to go to the Strand or Lyceum at home). I saw three films in two days: Freaks, now recognized as a wierd classic, something about Arsin Lupin, and Mata Hari, featuring Greta Garbo. Of course these pictures gave me psychological indigestion, and that night in the hotel I was feverish, with the images I had seen appearing and reappearing in the inner eye. But from then on I was hooked on movies.

It goes without saying that my behavior as a youth and that of Sri Ramakrishna had very few similarities. Yet there was one quality which we shared--a distaste for pretense. At Olivet College, years before I had ever heard the name of Sri Ramakrishna, motivated by a desire to puncture what I saw as pomposity, I practically replayed the scene of the young Gadadhar's scolding of Duradas Pyne.

The Matron at Olivet, too lady-like for comfort, always proclaiming pretensions of gentility, seemed to me a pompous old fool. (I now regret that early opinion of her, as I see her in retrospect as probably an impecunious widow trying somehow to find and maintain a place for herself in an uncaring world.) In any case, Matron was to be the butt of my joke.

Jack Rodifer, an upperclassman, was my accomplice. There was a "parlor" near the Matron's residence on the third floor in the women's wing where students were allowed to entertain a "date". So Jack made a reservation and brought me, clothed in an old black dress I had begged off Aunt May, a hat pulled down over my face, and wearing bedroom slippers as footwear as I had not provided myself with high heels. The Matron looked at me curiously but let us in. When we got there alone in the parlor--what to do? Shyness overcame me; I think I tried to play a few hymn book tunes on the piano, and Jack and I mumbled a duet or two. The Matron, still puzzled, came in once or twice on chaperoning visits. In a little while we decided to escape. As we went by the Matron on the way out she tumbled. "Good heavens, it's John Yale!" she cried.

But a much more serious prank occurred on a Saturday night in the spring of that 1931-1932 scholastic year. The President of the college, an evangelist named, if I recall, Reverend Shellhammer, was present in the common room. We were playing some game in which the person who was It had to answer yes or no. At one point Reverend Shellhammer was It. I worded a question in such a way that however he would respond, the answer would be in the affirmative--in effect asking blanket permission to take my girl friend and another student and his girl friend on a moonlight promenade that night to the forest.

Feeling confident that I had obtained a kind of indulgence, we crept out and took what was termed the Three-Mile Walk. It was a bit frightening and quite innocent. Feeling guilty, we soon sneaked back, I believed undetected. I remember going to the Sunday service the following morning, very tired but triumphant in knowing what I knew nobody else knew. But word got out and I was called before the Registrar and given a suspension. I was to remain on the premises and attend no classes for two weeks. Credit was to be withheld until I repented and was reinstated. I rebelled at this as I felt that I secured the President's permission, and anyway it had all been perfectly innocent--a springtime lark. It was near the end of the term. I just quit, went to Winnetka, and stayed there till the date when my parents expected me to return, and burned with fury concerning the injustice I felt had been done me.

The transcript of credits from Olivet which I asked for when I enrolled at Michigan State College that summer showed me as having earned only a half-year's credits which anyway Michigan State balked at recognizing since there was some question about Olivet's academic standing. The result being that I did the four-year BA course in three years and one summer session.

7.

So the world claimed me, as it does even poets. Yes, I wrote verses and short stories and plays and was considered to have talent, but life became more interesting than art.

The Depression being still on in 1935 when I graduated from college, I was thankful to obtain a high school teaching job in Mason, a small town near Lansing. My salary for the first academic year was one thousand dollars, half of which I saved by dining mostly on bread, sardines, and candy bars--which then cost five cents--so to save enough to travel to England during the summer vacation. The second year I was paid eleven hundred dollars, part of which I spent on a used Ford roadster with rumble seat. As the trip to Europe had delivered me from that dull small town during the summer months the first year, the Ford roadster permitted me to escape Mason every week end of the second. At the end of that second year my teaching contract was not renewed, for the School Board felt that I did not identify with the community--with a church, with local activities, with the town's aspirations and its children. This was perfectly true; I discounted them all. Nevertheless, my dismissal was a painful shock. Well, I faced facts, took courage in hand (and the \$120 I cleared from selling my car), and hitch-hiked to Chicago and the great world. I was a Chicagoan for the next eleven years.

What a city it was! Al Capone and John Dillinger were recent memories. Black jazz was in full flower. Different neighborhoods sheltered newly-arrived ethnic minorities--Czecks, Germans, Poles, Italians--whose culture had not yet been amalgamated; so that old-country customs, cuisine, music were there for native Americans like me to savour. Harriet Monroe's "Poetry" magazine, which had given such poets as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Robert Frost early audiences, was still functioning.

At first in Chicago I free-lanced children's books, then became a school book editor at the salary of thirty-five marvelous dollars a week, finally the director of a publishing house specializing in new type "teaching tools" and psychological tests. This was the then small firm called Science Research Associates of which Lyle Spencer was President, and which eventually became such a success. In due course I decorated my name with the initials of an advanced university degree. I became a member of professional organizations. I wrote learned articles and gave speeches. I even had myself rebaptized an Episcopalian in an added thrust toward respectability. Prestige, money, and romance were what I really cared about, and I experienced the sweet and bitter aspects of them all.

Of course nothing helped.

8.

My first close friend was a high school comrade named Joseph Cherwinski. We maintained our early affection for each other for fifty-odd years. But how different were our two lives! Whereas I left our home town as quickly as I could, to go everywhere and do everything, he remained in that midwestern city, to pass there his life as librarian and poet. I have sometimes asked myself whether Joe, by remaining close to his roots, achieved more effectively than I did what I scoured the world to

experience. I never came out and asked him, and now that Joe is dead I shall never know what he would reply. A few years ago Joe sent me a sonnet he had written called "To John" :

Trembling in Michigan a time ago
With cashmere eyes averted, lips apart
The saint-to-be to saintly ways said no
And broke his father's Fundamental heart.
He played Ravel, he sipped at gin, he read
Those bitter British poets (now serene).
He said, in searing pain, that God was dead.
He said good-by to Michigan. And mean,
He tried Chicago, L.A., and the East.
Caroused in fleshpots, earned a deal of dough,
And scorned the skeleton at every feast.
But his good heart, his sweet heart quivered no.
For saint he was and saint he came to be:
My friend, my sweet friend, back to God and me

Yes, this sums up my life not at all badly, although I would quibble about the words "scorned" in the eleventh line and "saint" in the thirteenth. I did not "scorn" the skeleton at every feast; I "was" the skeleton at every feast--a failed hedonist. For someone who becomes a devotee is oftener than not someone who has tried to take pleasure in the world but always found himself unable to lose himself in its proffered joys. At least in my case, even when engaged in the most sensational of pleasures, there came the attendant feeling: "This is not what I want; I'm not really meant for this." As for the word "saint", this is shorthand for something else. The word I should use is "sadhak"--a spiritual seeker. Or "devotee"--someone struggling to gain a state of grace. Attaining grace does join us, as Joe says, to the noble self we really are, and ties together past and future. And ties us to all others, too. One does go home again, but, fortunately, not at all the same person one was when one left.

9.

In the conversation with my mother long before, I had used the word "poet". In addition, the word "monk" had slipped out. I knew nothing about monks, and indeed we as Protestants viewed monastics with considerable Lutheran distaste. What I meant, of course, was someone who lived a clean, inspired life and gave himself to a lofty cause. Having lived among writers and been one myself, I saw that the status of literary craftsman wouldn't do. Could I really aspire to be a monk?

When I first joined the Hollywood center we used to discuss whether it is preferable to enter religion very young, knowing nothing, or older, having experienced everything. Those who entered as innocents, it was argued, might later feel that they had missed essential experiences; this might be destabilizing. Those older, it was argued, make their renunciation with their eyes open, after having traveled awhile on the Ship of Fools, or having spent a season in Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights and

understood the folly of the world for what it is. They enter as convinced veterans. I always argued in favor of this second position, since that described my own situation.

"Men," said Oscar Wilde, "enter marriage knowing everything and expecting nothing. Women enter marriage knowing nothing and expecting everything. Both are disappointed." In the present context the word "disappointed" is not the happiest word. It should be: "Both have to struggle". Innocents will phantasize on and hunger for experiences never known, but the experienced will phantasize equally on experiences experienced, with nostalgia to repeat them. Sri Ramakrishna spoke of the wooden bowl used for crushing garlic as forever smelling of garlic no matter how many times it is washed. He spoke of the bull which still tries to mount cows long after it has been castrated, out of remembered pleasure.

Now I support the first alternative. Better if you can enter early, at the moment when that youthful idealism first strikes you. The human being is a bundle of samskaras--impressions. Everything he does, everything he thinks, leaves its mark on the psyche (subtle body). These must be expressed, or sublimated, or, ideally, neutralized by higher impressions. Neutralizing samskaras is what spiritual struggle is. Even innocents carry sufficient samskaras from previous lives--Carl Jung would call them contents from the collective unconscious--which have to be dealt with. Why add to the stock unnecessarily from the present life, too?

I have often wondered what would have happened to me if I had met a wise man, a guru, in my teens. In 1930 several of Ramakrishna's direct disciples were still alive. But they were Bengalis living in India. In 1930 we would have considered them "natives" and idolators, such as my mother regretted not having been commissioned to convert. By 1930 the Vedanta centers in New York and San Francisco had been in existence for years, with wise swamis as heads. Swami Prabhavananda, who was to become my guru, then about thirty-seven years old, was just beginning his work in Hollywood. But it was not to be.

The situation is much better now, with numerous centers in the West. And to me, as an old man, encouraging young aspirants such as I might have been, and giving them an opportunity to avoid playing "the angry ape"--this is what I find a most sympathetic part of my work.

Even a prudent confessor, if I had been a Catholic, might have known what to do with me. Seminary and the priesthood? Early entry into a Christian order? I grew to know quite well a house of Franciscans later, at Santa Barbara, after I had become a brahmachari of the Ramakrishna Order, and wondered what I should have become had I gone to them at the time of my first questioning. I fear I should have been discontented ultimately with Catholic dogmatism, for the virus of universalism had already started working in me.

10.

So the Crisis of Age Thirty had begun to brew in me, and I saw that something had to be done. What happened next has been recounted in the book I edited a few years later called *What Vedanta Means to Me*, which account I have summarized in Chapter Two of the present book: the awakening of a serious

interest in religion, the discovery of Vedanta literature, the shift to Southern California, the meeting with Swami Prabhavananda, and the beginning of life in Swami Prabhavananda's Hollywood center.

The day I left Chicago for California, May 30, 1948, I quit smoking. I'd been a compulsive smoker of cigarettes for years, while continually resenting the enslavement. I reasoned that smoking, like any other practice, was to a large extent reinforced by association with other habitual activities; and since I was making a complete break with what I had been doing up to then, I could quit smoking less painfully during the transition. . Perhaps this was true, but it was a struggle, and on the trip to California and for some weeks after I got there I consumed fruit drops and chewed gum furiously. But I knew it was then or never. The first three days were painful, but passing then without a cigarette gave me courage to continue. At the end of ten days the thousand imploring fingers in my lungs grew less insistent, and by the end of a month the more acute withdrawal pains had diminished. Doing it "cold turkey" is the only way, or so I believe. But I knew then, as I know now, that I must maintain total rejection. One long drag, and I'd risk being back on the blasted things all over again.

11.

I took up residence at the Vedanta Society of Southern California as a monastic probationer on 1 April, 1950. But in a certain sense my entry should be chronicled as having occurred some months before. Swami Prabhavananda had instructed Belur Math--how informally these things were done at that time!--to write my name on the register the summer previously, as I was about to surpass the prescribed age limit for joining.

Life in the Hollywood center in 1950 and in all the years that followed was Oh so different from the independent existence I had known up to that time. It is all there in my diaries, of which some sixty-one volumes, each volume totaling perhaps 150 pages, exist. Yes, at least eight thousand pages, or a good 2,000,000 words of it. The sample entries which follow describe the new life and my early reaction to it.

June 25, 1951. Ram Nam night--a nightmare. The same old characters singing the same old unfortunate Hindu songs: they don't know what they mean, and they try to sing like synthetic Hindus, which they will never be. The last time we did Ram Nam Mrs. B, an old faithful, suddenly shouted, "I refuse anymore to sing words I don't understand." She threw her paper down and rushed out. We haven't seen her since. This eighteen-hour-a-day sociality is too much for me.

The nights are the worst. Sundown; really it begins at the close of the work day, when I shut the office. I feel so empty, so much in need I could cry. Not exactly for someone, but of some understanding, some solution.

And then I go to arati and say the Lord's name for an hour, or rather for forty-five minutes, for fifteen are taken up by the ringing of the bell and shouting of a monotonous "Jai Sri Ramakrishna" followed by a trite-sounding poem and a Bengali song that even in

translation is pretty senseless.

Then supper, which I skip, as I do breakfast. Just too boring, these people whom I'd never select as friends or employees or associates. Meals involve more of the same uneatable starches. I cry for citrus and proteins. Bread, rice, overcooked vegetables ruined by spices. Every meal involves a great pile of dishes and that same excited bantering chatter which I find so revolting. It is like a cheap fraternity, that's what it is, for these people have the brilliancy and poise of average twenty-year-olds.

Then to the living room for an hour or two of darshan--Swami sitting in his chair, and the bumpkins sitting around, mostly in silence, or stabbing out at something of interest--dreadful stuff about politics, personalities, common chitchat.

Then at 9:00 or 9:30 Swami gets up. "Well, good night," he says, and marches off to his room. A few follow him, the H's, P's, A's. I've been to one or two of these reunions, but I'm not a habitue. It consists of nightcaps and more chitchat. You see, Swami has a wonderful desire to make the days fun--an air of festivity, which often shocks my workaday soul. It's all too festive for me.

Can it be worked out? I don't feel noble; there's no payoff in that--you'd just be laughed at. I can't pray. I feel no closeness to Swami, although I dimly see that there must be a thrashing out of all this with him if it doesn't clear up.

I sleep well; thank God for that. To sleep, to die awhile. To have things solved by just going away without loss of face, without muffing your one great chance in this life.

August 30, 1951. What is this drive toward? Is it God? Then why are my God-concentration times so dull? When I told John van Druten something of this, he said, "No doubt much of it is dull, as you say. But what about your--may I call them--ecstasies?" Honey, there just ain't no ecstasies.

April 9, 1952. I'm stuck--unable to feel anything for religion, unable to go back. When I said this, Swami became quite serious, but he didn't condemn me. Said it was normal. As to the statement that I don't love God, he replied, "Good! Neither do I. If we said we did it would be sentimentality."

June 10, 1952. Swami at last disciplined me openly. During the past few weeks I have been pushing in to break down the formality of our relationship. A week or two ago he actually patted me on the cheek--so I knew I was in for it. So he chose my work of manuscript checking on his and Christopher Isherwood's Patanjali aphorisms book as the subject of five violent lectures, none of which was merited, because the manuscript as it came to me was faulty.

I had always vowed I'd not retreat in rage when my time came, but move ahead with love. This I did, making Swami's bed, getting his drinking water, etc. He later expressed a kind of remorse to Chris, telling him I'd reacted very well.

As we know, such disciplining has nothing to do with the merits or demerits of the situation it is based upon. In fact, to scold you for something about which you're not wrong is more telling. The Patanjali manuscript was poor mechanically, and we finally accepted most of the adjustments I had wanted to make in it. Swami's point was: "Who do you think you are that you can correct Chris? He is a standard English writer. He is "creating" the English language." Chris himself confessed inadequacy regarding his mechanics, and of course Swami backtracked in the blandest manner and without the least loss of face.

12.

And so it went. I had a hard time of it at Hollywood, and consequently made things hard for my guru and the other members. For what was happening was a remodeling, or the commencement of a drastic remodeling, of my psyche. That doesn't come easily, especially to the mature. Despair, rage, humiliation--you have to experience them all.

But I was happy, too. I worked at tasks that pleased me--editorial work, construction, propagation of Vedantic ideas. In 1952-53 I visited all the Vedanta centers in America and Europe, spent five months in India looking first-hand at the home base of our movement, and wrote a book describing a neophyte's encounter with that strange land. I took brahmacharya in 1955 and became Prema Chaitanya, then went on for eight more sometimes desperate, sometimes satisfying, years until I went back to India and took sannyas in 1963-64.

In 1966 I shifted to the Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna at Gretz, France, where I have been ever since, and where I am at this moment composing these lines. Now, of course, I am thankful--and amazed--to see that, in spite of everything, or probably because of everything, I have nearly made it back, in Joe's words, "to God and me".

In a speech I gave at Gretz after a dinner on July 29, 1988, attended by many devotees, to celebrate my seventy-fifth birthday, I offered this summing up.

Dear Friends,

This is the twenty-second time that my anniversaire has been celebrated at Gretz. But this is the first time that I have consented to respond to the best wishes of our friends by giving a little speech. On all those previous occasions I found myself too shy or too embarrassed to respond. What could I say before such an undeserved outpouring of affection? I sensed

deeply the sweetness of your gestures in signing my birthday card and coming to my birthday dinner--but a feeling of reserve forbade me to express my emotion openly.

But today, after nearly a quarter of a century of silence, I have decided to do things differently. I intend to give a public response to these gestures of friendship which foster me today and have supported me all these years. If I don't do it now, when shall I ever be able to? You all know how old I am today. Most of my childhood friends are already dead, dying, or gaga. Statistically speaking, I must be classified as a survivor with highly uncertain prospects.

If I had undertaken a career, say, in the army, instead of the one I chose, I would have been retired twenty years ago. If I had worked as a businessman I could have taken my retirement a good ten years ago. Even those antiquies of the Church, the bishops, the archbishops, and the cardinals, are forced to retire at the age I have reached today. But not me! First time in my life I ever thought it might be a good idea to have been a Roman Catholic!

For it seems that the answer to the question of when one as a swami is going to retire is: When one closes one's eyes for the last time or can no longer get out of bed. Voila, our system of Social Security in the Ramakrishna Order! If you are tired of me--and I can certainly understand it if you should be--please pray to the Lord that I may be relieved of my job. I have a book or two partly written which I should very much like the time to complete.

You remember the last words of the dying priest in that splendid book by Georges Bernanos *Le Journal d'un Curé de Compagne*. Defeated, unemployed, fatally sick, he expires with these words: "Grace, grace; it is all grace". This too is what I have found; it is all grace. Grace to have been born of parents who taught me honesty and responsibility. Grace that they should have gifted me with a healthy body. Grace that I acquired a good education and enjoyed the friendship over the years of interesting and inspiring people. Grace that I was always able to work in jobs which interested me. Grace also--as Swami Vivekananda says in one of his letters--that I made big mistakes, for I have profited from them. Grace that I found a guru who took the pains to try to make something worthwhile out of me. A supreme grace that I could enter into the condition of life which I consider the most ideal of all conditions--that of the sannyasin. Grace that I could work this last quarter century in ideal conditions and with helpful associates under the protection of an ideal leader. Grace, grace; it is all grace.

I know that I am not an easy person, but on the other hand, the role chosen for me has not always been easy either. But whatever my faults, I do not believe they are a result of any excessive desire on my part for dominance or for self-aggrandisement. And I thank God that I have never been desirous of assuming the role of religious teacher, that I never felt

the itch to be a guru.

Indeed, one thing that has disquieted me over the years has been the considerable posturing which goes on in the name of religion. What we may call exotic pretensions coming from the East, with all those beards and robes! My position concerning religion has since the beginning been wholly pragmatic; I was never interested in Hinduizing myself or learning much of Indian arts and sciences. What does Ramakrishna-Vedanta mean to a thoroughly western person; what can it do for him as a plain American or European in need of spiritual awakening? That is what I wanted to test out. For if the revelation of Sri Ramakrishna is going to prevail as a worldwide force it cannot succeed as a foreign transplant; it will have to adapt itself to indigenous people in indigenous situations. All the books and articles I have written and the sermons I have preached have focused on this one goal, of finding a way for westerners to join the devotee caste of Ramakrishna while at the same time feeling comfortable as themselves in their own natural milieu.

If I can summarize the other objectives for which I have striven during my years of service at the Centre Vedantique, I'd list them as follows. My constant effort has been to see that order prevailed in the ashrama, that everything ran harmoniously, so that residents and guests could find a real haven of solace here. Also I hoped to aid the President, to make things easy for him, so that his talent for spiritual leadership could be exercised to the maximum.

I am often amused by the fact that in effect I have had not one but two spiritual exemplars, and each totally different the one from the other. Most aspirants have their hands full in trying to accommodate themselves to one. I have had two. That of course is why I have become so perfect! In the 1950's and the early 1960's it was Swami Prabhavananda--a proponent of the directive school of disciplining, who was my teacher. He presided over us with a watchful eye and told us in vigorous terms what to do and what not to do. He had many successes and some rebellious failures also. My second exemplar--and you all know to whom I refer--was just the opposite--an advocate of the nondirective approach. Give a good example, and let the student work out his own salvation, guided, of course, by the Lord. That method works and sometimes does not work also. As a product of both of these techniques, I believe I am able to evaluate the merits of each. I must conclude that I prefer the latter, although it has to be said that many students seem to prefer the more directive relationship in which the guru is seen as all-knowing and all-prevailing. For the immature, perhaps yes. But for the mature, the nondirective approach to me seems preferable. The saving formula, often enunciated by our President, works like this: "Yes, he is doing wrong, but his wrongdoing will make him suffer, and that will wake him up and make him change." (If he and we can live long enough!)

Among the many centers of the Ramakrishna movement, Gretz is well known and highly admired. Many see the ashram of Gretz as a model for the organization of other centers in

the West. Last summer I spoke at the Vedanta Convention at Ganges near Chicago on this topic and roused quite a lot of excitement. Vedanta societies organized as churches are attracting but few new adherents; the ashrama model is coming to the fore as a more effective agency for giving aspirants experience in religious living. As a locale separate from the confusion of today's world, where people can go to learn sane techniques of living and habits of devotion, the ashrama offers an alternative precious to men and women of today. Already other centers are beginning to emulate us, and we may see the organization of Vedanta in the West revolutionized according to the Gretz model in the years to come. I want to emphasize my own commitment to this type of organization, although I must say that presiding over an ashrama is the hardest work I know; and living in an ashrama demands greater than normal sacrifices of time and privacy. Not only you who live here but you who come here regularly to help in so many ways and thus make the functioning of Gretz possible, know this; but you must understand also how much these sacrifices mean to those who benefit from such efforts. You are doing more for your fellow man than you know. This is an actual putting into effect of the motto of the Ramakrishna Mission: "For my own liberation and for the good of the world."

I believe that this is all I wish to say today except to express my thanks for your presence here and all the evidences of affection which you have offered today and over the years. My prayer today is that the Lord will grant every one of you a life as happy and productive as he has granted me.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Two

The Devotee as Inquirer after Truth

1.

As I grew up, several things began to trouble me about the fundamentalist religious heritage in which I was born. First, was the matter of exclusiveness. The people of our denomination felt that they possessed Truth uniquely and insisted on that idea. It didn't matter that all other Protestant denominations who differed slightly from ours did so too, and the Roman Catholics as well. Besides, it wasn't a case of all those others simply being wrong; they were also going to be punished for their bad judgment in having chosen not to ride on the divinely ordained bandwagon. They would have a lesser place in heaven, or perhaps not reach there at all. And for the vast non-Christian world, well, it was better not to speculate on the ultimate fate of those billion or two billion souls.

It seems to me now, and will seem to many who read these words, that I am referring to some unbelievably quaint, long-vanished period of human thought. But these ideas were current only a couple of generations ago, and are accepted avidly by many born-again Christians even today. Conservative evangelical movements such as the Moral Majority attract multitudes in the United States through gigantic church programs and television broadcasts. (I shan't even refer to modern muslimans and communists, who in their fashion are as zealot as we Protestants were.)

How troubling a thought. I asked myself how anyone could be so sure of this. One didn't have to be overly observant to see that person was narrow because he was limited, ignorant. Was it intelligent to conclude that someone who had been born into a different spiritual tradition and was following it conscientiously should be punished for not believing as we did? What if you were a native somewhere where no missionary had ever penetrated? And what about those who had lived and died before Christ was born? How could the leaders of our denomination be so sure that Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists--yes, and even for the most part the Roman Catholics--were not getting something from their faith? What about the elevated scriptures of other religions and the fact that wise men, undeniable saints, were known among the pagans? Was not this attitude of thinking everyone else benighted just a terrible religious provincialism?

A second problem confronting my adolescent attempts to be a practicing Christian was that I could never seem to get "saved". As described in the many sermons I listened to during my early days, conversion was an occurrence which, when it came, gave you a particular assurance and miraculously changed you from a bad to a good person. But to my dismay, although I prayed for it and responded to altar calls to my fullest ability on several occasions, I could never achieve this transformation.

A third difficulty was my failure to see how, if God was God, such differences should be permitted to exist between man and man in capacity, opportunity, and inclination. I listened to the various Christian

explanations of this; but they added up, it seemed to me, to one of two conclusions--that God must be either demoniac or whimsical. If demoniac, how could he be God? And if his acts were merely capricious, why bother to posit, as responsible for the universe, the existence of a God at all? Since it seemed only just that the Director of all creation should practice at least the minimum code of justice of a good and wise human, I could not accept the Christian explanation of individual differences.

Fourth, to me the Christian doctrine of history was not reasonable. It simply did not explain the past sensibly or give you a means for viewing the present or future. Propounded by that most able public-relations man of the early church, St Augustine, in his *The City of God*, the theory is so familiar as to seem almost law: Creation began at a certain point in time and is proceeding toward a culminating event which will continue eternally. Adam was born guiltless, but tempted by Satan, through his own self-will, fell from his perfect condition, introducing sin into the world. All men inherit this sin, and each has his chance--one chance--to come out of it. Some continue to sin up to their death and are thereafter everlastingly damned; some, through the mediation of Christ as expressed through the Catholic Church, gain their redemption and share in an unending resurrection. History thus becomes essentially a battle between the powers of God and Satan, from which God must emerge victorious. Earthly troubles--persecutions, wars, temptations to follow false gods, and all other evils of past and present--have a purpose: they are the flails with which God--"our" God, that is, the true God of the Old and New Testaments--since the beginning of time, has separated the wheat from the chaff, the elect from the damned. Such occurrences have been the tools which have fashioned the citizens with whom He would populate his city of vision, paradise.

What a crude and naive teaching--and how complacent! Everything I knew was at variance with any straight-line theory of progress; and time, which is its very cornerstone, had already been proved to be illusory. The concept of perpetual progress did not square with common observation. Augustine did not see that the new order he was promoting was certain--it too to lose eventually its dynamic quality, as the Roman Empire of his day had done, and to enter, equally, into its own period of barbarism and decay. Then too, how could one, on the basis of this Christian theory of history, explain the infinite age of the universe, the previous decline of great cultures and valid religions, the rise and fall of animal life, the rhythm of evolution-involution our eye is witness to from our birth? How indeed to view the falling off of Christian sanctity, the fracturing of Christian society and the vulgarization of the Church--that Gate to the City of God--itself?

And a fifth stumbling block to accepting Protestant dogma was its, to me, inadequate handling of the problem of evil. There is a force of evil, personified by Satan; and of good, exemplified by God. Each wars in this universe, and in men's hearts, at times one winning, and at times the other. However the end of the story, as in a western melodrama, is known in advance; the Good Guy has the greater power and is sure to triumph in the end.

To this I always said: "Then why does He let it go on--all this mess, all this suffering? If He really is stronger, why doesn't He put an end to the agony?"

And I was given this answer: "Oh no. We grow by suffering. Evil is permitted to persist for its chastening value. We are trained by evil."

"But are we?" I would reason. "Is evil a proper tool for a good Almighty to use?" (Youth is always shocked that God should be less literal than he!) 'Many are not trained at all--only drowned in the world's evil. If God is omnipotent, and it's trained people that he wants, why doesn't He just create us already chastened, finished, trained?"

And the answer that I got was: "Because we don't permit him to Because of the perversity in man's heart. Man wants to do wrong; he likes doing wrong. He was once perfect, but he chose to turn away. He chose, as he still goes on choosing, to resist perfection."

I saw, of course, that Christians must take this position, for without it the whole idea of Christ as special redeemer--on which Christian theology is based would fall. But really, who can agree that any human being would choose evil, clear-mindedly prefer to spurn God? One might be ignorant, impassioned, impetuous, a fool. But would anyone rationally decide to remain permanently perverse, habituated in a course which must lead to his eventual destruction? Putting the onus on Adam doesn't help, for is it logical that I should suffer as a result of an act committed by some individual I could never have known, thousands of years in the past? And advancing the theory of predestination that God wants some people to be lost well that is just a blasphemous teaching; that is, again, making God demoniac.

That man has a tendency to be less than a saint, that pain may be educational, was easy to see. But that God should will man to suffer, or that man should rationally pursue wickedness that I could not and would not accept.

2.

So after many unsuccessful attempts to make a "decision for Christ" which would work and be permanent, towards the end of my teens, as already mentioned, I made a trembly, guilt-ridden withdrawal from church. In deep conflict, I came to the conclusion that I was an anomaly who must somehow attempt to find Truth through some alternate means.

In Chapter Four I describe how I searched for an ideal in the social sciences and the gradual disillusionment they afforded. When I chanced to be told one day by the manager of the hotel where the American Psychological Association, of which I was a member, was holding its annual meeting that we adjustment specialists were acting away from home about as badly as had the Legionnaires when they had had their convention in that same hotel a few months earlier, I felt sure that I was engaged in a very dubious quest.

The best proof that I was not on a false trail would be to encounter a social scientist who was himself well adjusted, or someone who had been perfected through psychological techniques. I was tired of listening to mere theorizing as to what great things our programs might accomplish. I wanted to see

someone somewhere who was a proper result of what we preached. It was at this point that I met Harry Hopkins. It was a thrilling moment. He had always been an ideal. A trained social worker, a man who had gone through a lengthy psychiatric analysis, he also had had enormous power, as friend of and adviser to President Franklin Roosevelt, to put into practice many of the same ideas we as social scientists supported. He had been in charge of some of the largest social engineering projects ever undertaken. I sat beside Harry Hopkins for a couple of hours in a Pullman chaircar traveling from Washington to New York. It was in July of 1945. Hopkins had just returned from his trip as President Truman's emissary to Stalin to try to settle the vexing problem of Poland's independence. Here was a man who, at the height of his life, should have something hopeful to tell me about scientific humanitarianism. I questioned Hopkins closely and he answered frankly. And what did he have to say? That he was defeated; that he could see no hope for mankind, no solution anywhere. He was sunk in the deepest despair. He was to die a year later.

Perhaps I should not have been shocked, but I was. And I recalled other older men I had encountered. When young they were said to have been courageous and idealistic. But even when successful, as old men they had become hopeless and defeated, without belief, without peace. History was full of examples of bankrupt humanitarians. Was that what I was here for to grow old and disillusioned? Life couldn't be designed as such a bad joke as that; there must be something perfect and clean somewhere.

3.

Eventually I concluded that for both an end to believe in and an influence to help me toward it, I was looking in the wrong place. Reason told me that truth must be somewhere back in the field of religion, but where? I was disenchanted with my childhood faith. Roman Catholicism could be discounted at the outset, as more of the same. In becoming an Episcopalian, I had hoped that something helpfully atmospheric and artistic might be available from that old faith. I even approached an Anglican monastic order; but again, more of the same. I looked into the claims of Christian Science and other New Thought sects, with their emphasis on sweetness and positive thinking, and concluded their approach to be superficial. And never anywhere in all my searches did I find a representative of his faith whom I felt knew experientially much of what he was talking about.

It was then that the publications of Vedanta came to my attention: Christopher Isherwood's Vedanta for the Western World; Aldous Huxley's The Perennial Philosophy; and Swami Prabhavananda's translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, with its classic introduction by Huxley. And I began to read again the New Testament, with opened eyes: "And he said to them all, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?"

This was it. Maybe if I had been born a thousand or so years before I might have found what I wanted in the Christian tradition. But now, even though put off by some matters oriental as being in dubious taste, and even though the word Hinduism scared me to death, I had to conclude that what I must have was

available only through a religious journey to the East. Hence the shift to Swami Prabhavananda's center and all that that shift set in motion.

4.

For me, then, Vedanta was at last the right answer. For people of this day and age who really want religion, but for one reason or another cannot find fulfillment in the faith of their heritage, it offers much. I listed earlier five stumbling blocks I found in the faith in which I was brought up. I shall mention them again and show how Vedanta met these problems.

I had been troubled, first, by the conflicting claims of the many religions and sects. If everyone claims that he has truth, and the claims are not compatible, can anyone have it? It just made you wonder whether anyone had or could have the truth; for what could be more discouraging to the innocent seeker of truth than the mutual contention which goes on in its support?

The Semitic tradition, for reasons unknown, seems to be constitutionally exclusive. In the history of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, fanaticism is a prominent feature. The occidental mind is forever attempting to find and establish truths which are absolute, unassailable, subject to no contradiction. Indian thought, I found out, on the contrary, claims that various sorts of seemingly conflicting views can all be true at the same time, for such kinds of truths, verbally established, are relative. In studying Vedanta, I was bewildered at first, and then comforted, to find that no action, no view, no position is clearly right or wrong in and of itself. Everything, I was often told, "depends". It can only be said that that truth is more true than another which leads more directly than the other towards higher truth. Accept the ideas of the heterodox; respect superstition; permit the beliefs of your opponent. These, like yours, are provisional, representing stages. Welcome all contradictions; they may be somebody else's truths to live by.

But there is a Truth which is not relative, and that is that we are essentially Spirit. The evolution which is occurring is man's progress from the belief that he is separate and individual, in his state of relativity, to the certainty that he is one with God, in which he goes beyond relativity, beyond truth and untruth. But this, we are told, is a state never arrived at rationally, but experienced, realized.

Aldous Huxley brought these ideas together in a brief equation which he called the Perennial Philosophy, first enunciated by the mystic Bruno Rontini in the Huxley novel *Time Must Have a Stop*. On other occasions Huxley spoke of the affirmations making up this formula as the Highest Common Denominator of spiritual religion, and the Minimum Working Hypothesis:

For those of us who are not congenitally the members of any organized Church, who have found that humanism and blue-sky domeism are not enough, who are not content to remain in the darkness of spiritual ignorance, the squalor of vice or that other squalor of mere respectability, the minimum working hypothesis would seem to be about as follows:

- That there is a Godhead or Ground, which is the unmanifested principle of all

manifestation.

- That the Ground is transcendent and immanent.
- That it is possible for human beings to love, know and, from virtually, to become actually identified with the Ground.
- That to achieve this unitive knowledge, to realize this supreme identity, is the final end and purpose of human existence.
- That there is a Law or Dharma, which must be obeyed, a Tao or Way, which must be followed, if men are to achieve their final end.
- That the more there is of I, me, mine, the less there is of the Ground; and that consequently the Tao is a Way of humility and compassion, the Dharma a Law of mortification and self-transcending awareness.

Huxley reexamined this equation in the extraordinary introduction he contributed to the Prabhavananda-Isherwood Bhagavad-Gita:

At the core of the Perennial Philosophy we find four fundamental doctrines:

- First: the phenomenal world of matter and of individualized consciousness--the world of things and animals and men and even gods--is a manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be non-existent.
- Second: human beings are capable not merely of knowing about the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known.
- Third: man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul. It is possible for a man, if he so desires, to identify himself with the spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature with the spirit.
- Four: man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground.

This compact credo gave me the formula needed for viewing conflicting religious claims. So compact, so compatible with world wisdom. I could turn to religion with a broad spirit, without supporting any new provincialism. One may approach the top of a mountain from any side, but when the summit is reached, pathways merge. Climbers may be far apart when they are in the foothills of theology, ritualistic observances, or organizational practices. Climatic and geographical causes, historic factors, and group temperaments all make for different starting points. That is normal. It adds to the richness of the pageant. Is life in this world not more delectable for the varied contributions of Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism, or indeed even, say, of Theosophy, Scientology, and Primal Scream Therapy? How artistic that there should be room for such variety how rich the texture is, and how much more interesting than if the Almighty had decreed one antiseptically safe, exclusive, orthodox way. Although he is Unity, God enjoys, it seems, his recreation, his play, his lila, in endorsing variety!

But the realization of the highest truth--the Truth that is "truest of the true"--is all the same realization. For God, when he is found, the avatars and saints tell us, is One, the One without a second. If anyone will compare their statements about this, as Huxley does in *The Perennial Philosophy*, one must agree. Or if one wants experimental data from one who proceeded in a scientific spirit, there are the well-documented reports concerning Sri Ramakrishna, who followed in all orthodoxy one after another the world's great religious paths, reaching the same Light equally by way of each.

Second, I grew to see that perfection is most unlikely to come precipitously, instantaneously; and it is illogical to expect that it should. Do we produce new tissue all of a sudden, become piano virtuosos or figure skaters in an instant, or reach health, after we have been sick, in a flash? Do we find any development in nature occurring without struggle, effort, time? The fabric of the mind, I saw, is remade most slowly of all. Hence yoga--a word and discipline I had formerly shied away from as denoting something in objectionable taste--became to me a course in self-improvement. Adjustable to individual leanings, yoga provides a variety of practices for the slow remodelling of the mind and discovery of the Divine Ground. By recollectedness, by meditation, by repetition of the Name, by selfless work and abnegation, one might, I began to see, slowly turn one's moment-to-moment existence into a freeing sacrament.

Third, about individual differences--the inequities we find between people, and Christianity's unsatisfactory explanation of them. Through its rejection of the doctrines of reincarnation and karma in the fourth century, Christianity fashioned for itself, it appeared to me, a trap from which it was later never able to escape. To me, the principles of reincarnation and karma seemed, the first time I heard of them, patently sensible. At ten or so I overheard my parents talking about an aunt of mine who had taken up Theosophy. "She believes that people gain salvation by coming back to earth again and again in different bodies--imagine!"

"Capital," I thought, like a light going on.

Theories of reincarnation and karma tie in with science and explain individual differences wonderfully: all results have a cause; my present condition is the result of what I have been, what I have really wished for; and I may govern my own future by what I am, by what I wish for now. Thus responsibility is placed on the individual instead of others, on God, or on some ambiguous fate.

And you have, with reincarnation and karma, a reasonable basis for social theory. We may say that all men are born free and equal; but the evidence of our eyes demonstrates that they are not. Still, the idealistic man is repelled by class, desires to be equalitarian in outlook. Where reincarnation and karma are accepted, he can be. The criterion of rank is spiritual unfoldment. Divinity is manifested more completely in some than in others, and that man is most estimable in whom it is unfolded most. The real aristocrat is the saint, the plebian the person of minor spiritual evolution. This is where the emphasis of class should be. But every man is equally a repository of the identical indwelling spirit, and must be respected as such.

Fourth, about religion and history.

Nearly everyone will admit now that we have come to a queer time--of vulgarity, of disillusionment, of social and psychological dislocation. After fifteen hundred years of attempting to built Augustine's City of God, Western man has reached a point where he can see that he has done nothing of the kind, and perhaps question at last the familiar straight-line theory of history.

Yet there seems to have been for a while a kind of kingdom of heaven on earth in the West, a social-spiritual youth and flowering. This is frequently and appropriately called the Age of Faith.

But that was long ago. By the time of the Renaissance the tide had reached its crest and was beginning to fall back, to run away in a thousand rivulets which no one could ever rechannel into one stream again. The Catholic Church tried. But religion had become institutionalized and dogmatic--unable to adapt itself to changing needs. As more screens of time and human interpretation came down between man and the original Christ, spiritual ardor lessened. The effect of Christianity in shaping faith and morals diminished almost to the vanishing point. The Church split up, philosophy went off in various directions, and eventually naturalism appeared as the prevailing viewpoint. Organized Christianity went firmly on, as though nothing had happened; but actually religion in the West by the sixteenth or seventeenth century had come to have very little influence on life. Most thought which really impelled action stemmed, as it does today, from naturalistic assumptions.

This was the way I saw what had occurred, and the concept of historical cycles seemed far more logical to me than any theory of straight-line progress. It was clear that a scheme of rise and fall was the law of life. The cyclical theory was prominent in Greek thought. Some good historians had supported it in the modern period: Giambattista Vico in the early eighteenth century, and Brooks Adams, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee in our time. The configuration of a culture's life may be compared to an oblique 5. There is the commencement, a deliberate rise, the rapid ascent to a height, then a long tapering off. This cyclic view of history explained where we are today and how we got here. It also explained the mystery of the many earlier civilizations which have been but are no more: the glory that was Rome--and Greece--and Egypt--and Vedic India--and ancient China--and probably countless more.

This was how, by the time I reached Vedanta, I had come to view history. All that was needed was for Vedanta to supply the missing modus operandi--what makes a new culture rise in the first place. This became apparent at once. The massive unifying force which produces a new culture is the revelation, the life on earth, of a son of God. It is the advent of a saint or Incarnation which inspires a new flowering.

It was always understood in India, and is clearly stated in the Bhagavad-Gita, that God reappears on earth at those sterile times when goodness grows weak and evil increases. Then he makes himself a body and returns, to reestablish righteousness and deliver the God-seeker. To an agrarian culture God came as a charming shepherd boy, in the form of Krishna. The hard-shelled formalism of the day was broken, as ecstatic love for God flowered once again. In a civilization of feudalism he appeared as an ideal young prince, who renounced to become the ascetic Rama. His preaching as Buddha, at a period when faith had

become strangled by a decadent priestcraft, was: Be a lamp unto yourself. Up and down the Judea of Caesar's age he walked as a familiar kind of prophet, called Jesus, but with a new message that was to replace obedience with charity, a shopkeeping ethics with love. Many more appearances have been recorded. It is even said that in times far gone by, when life was all aquatic, the Lord swam the world's oceans as a superb, exemplary fish!

Considering the modern state of Christian culture, I was prepared to believe that it was time for God to come anew. Again Vedanta supplied the needed ingredient. It said that he had. Around the time when Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States, God, this time having assumed the form of a temple priest named Ramakrishna, was giving out a message which would start a new civilization. He was here, in one of his innumerable second comings, living just north of Calcutta. Just on the eve of the development of instantaneous communication and speedy transportation--when the world was becoming one in time and space and must become one in spirit--he had introduced the new motif of harmony.

I congratulated myself that I was in on it. Somehow I had been lucky enough, in rejecting the last fragments of the final tapering off of the old curve, to have landed astride the rising stroke of the brand-new S. A most entrancing moment in which to be alive! To know where one is in history is good. To be able to visualize what is going to happen next is also good. And to be alive at one of the turning points of man's fate--that is best of all.

And fifth, about my old problem of good and evil.

When Christopher Isherwood was living at the Hollywood Vedanta Society, and editing the Society's magazine, he wrote a fanciful little piece--I suspect to fill some last-minute gap in an issue--on the Kalpataru or wish-fulfilling tree of Indian fable.

Some children are gathered on a lawn with their uncle. He tells them of this magic tree: "If you speak to it and tell it a wish; or if you lie down under it and think, or even dream a wish, then that wish will be granted. It is over there. It is called a Kalpataru."

So the children try out the magic of the tree. They run to the Kalpataru and, looking up into its serene branches, address to it all their desires. Most of the wishes are very unwise. Many of them end, Isherwood tells us, "in indigestion or tears". But the wishing tree fulfills them just the same; it is not interested in giving good advice.

Years pass. The children are all men and women now. They have long since forgotten the Kalpataru in their uncle's garden. They have found new wishes and are trying to fulfill them. At first the aim of their lives is to get these wishes granted; but later on it is just the opposite. The whole effort finally is to find wishes which will be very hard--even impossible--to fulfill.

What we are to understand is that the whole Creation is a giant Wishing Tree. A branch extends into every heart. Whatever longing rises there, some force, some justice, operates so that some time or other--

in this life or another--it will be granted. Granted, yes--along with its attendant retinue of consequences, life's indigestions and tears.

As I studied Vedanta I found this idea just, practical, and intellectually satisfying. We may--we must--have everything we want. In fact, this creation is nothing but our desires in substantial form; and one's own condition is in it something one oneself has ordained--a vehicle one's soul has fashioned best capable of traveling the trails his dreams have laid down, qualified, of course, by the consequences.

The universe we see is relative. It is not good or bad; it is just relative. The Indian term for it is maya. It is built up of pairs of opposites: pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, fulfillment and frustration. To claim the pleasant is to gain, equally, the painful; to grasp joy is, as well, to hold sorrow. We find this out; we have disappointment after disappointment. Yet we go on seeking; we go on wishing. We cannot do otherwise, for something in us will not give up; something in us goes on commanding us to persist as to gain the perfect joy.

The motivation, Vedanta told me, is the longing to know God, to discover the real Ground of our being. We don't know that's what attracts us, for maya has obscured that real self. But it is the hunger to know God which produces this restless search through many lives. Every movement of the heart is an obscured wish for God. We don't know it, but that's what it is. The drunkard's search for bliss in a bottle is a search for God. Human love is would-be mystic union. The famine for delight, for experience, for meaning, the pursuit of beauty--all the fluttering of the bird that would escape to a larger air. We keep trying to reach the sun by shinnying up every lamp-post.

Eventually you catch on to the swindle. Finally, after you have tried everything and achieved the same sense of frustration for perhaps the hundredth or the thousandth time, in sheer exhaustion you give up attempting to find the absolute in the relative. That is what, I learned, is called the dawning of discrimination. You perceive at last what bad is, if there is such a thing; it is the ignorant hunt for light in the shadows; it is confusion of the relative with the Real; it is false identification. You grasp at last--again if there is such a thing--what good is too: anything which helps to break the hallucination; anything which shatters the apparent so that the Real may shine forth. Then you reach out to catch the mind and wrestle with it, and hold it back from its running. That is what renunciation is. And the way you get the strength to reverse the direction of your mind, and the skill to do it, is through meditation and allied spiritual practices. Meditation is creation in reverse--a dehypnotizing process.

That was Swami Prabhavananda's immediate advice to me when I met him for the first time in November of 1948. I had asked it of others, now I asked it of him--in effect: "Lord, what must I do to be saved?"

"Meditate, meditate, meditate," was the Swami's response.

Once, when upset about some terrible and seemingly meaningless trouble that had come into another's life, I spat out to Prabhavananda: "What a mess! How poorly God designed this universe. The most

debased of us could have done it better."

Swami's response was: "No. He designed it very well; because the way he designed it brings us to him."

All life is struggling upward. The vulture tearing at dead flesh, the liar trying to improve his situation through falsehood, the highwayman robbing to get comforts for his family--each is aspiring to something better than he has known; and each of these I have been. So with the madman, the murderer, the philanderer. One cannot apologize, nor should one regret, because it is this sort of error which makes one turn from error.

Why does the world exist? That is like asking why the first acts of a play exist: to make possible the perfect ending. This world drama was composed to provide a meeting at last between lover and beloved. The scenes of comedy and joy; the stretches of stupid melodrama; the episodes of tragedy; the sub-plots and false climaxes--all are necessary to built up suspense and create a crashing climax.

God thus, according to Vedanta, does not decree good and evil. He has nothing to do with such matters. Where relativity is, there he is not. Where he is, relativity is not. Take your choice; if you choose relativity, do not try to involve God in it. If you choose God--and in time each man shall--you will wring your hands a good deal less about the problem of good and evil.

This seemed to me to be satisfactory and logical.

5.

Vedanta appealed to the Devotee as inquirer after Truth, hence, because it is so attractive rationally; it allows one to be cosmopolitan, permissive, broad. It furnishes a psychologically sound program for personal growth and developemnt. Its tenets square with discoveries of modern science--as a veritable cascade of new books on physics as mysticism and mysticism as physics demonstrates--and furnishes a basis for equitable social practice. Vedanta illuminates history. And Vedanta copes successfully--or as successfully as anything can--with the problem of good and evil.

This, then, is what Vedanta means, or has come to mean, to me.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Three

The Devotee as Psycho-Physical Being

1.

There have been many attempts to understand human motivation, to define the psychological system in man which makes him think, feel, act, and react as he does. Religion was always ready with an answer. Judaism and Christianity were clear about this. Innate sinfulness is what characterizes unregenerate man. It is craving that is the motivator, proclaimed Buddhism. Ego, ignorance of his true nature, said the Hindu. Philosophers have put forward their theories--thrust for freedom, will to dominate, aggressivity. Nowadays it is the psychotherapist and the psychiatrist who offer conceptions trying to account for the primary drives: personal expression, progeny, appreciation, love. Sri Ramakrishna's definition was concise: Lust and Greed. That is to say, it is sensual motives and motives of personal aggrandisement which, in his ordinary state, drive the ordinary man and mask the true Ground of his being.

2.

In 1966 before leaving Southern California for France I made an appointment with a Santa Barbara doctor to have a complete physical examination. I was getting older; I had heard about the male menopause and the troubles aging men sometimes experience with the prostate gland. It seemed a good idea to have a checkup. I did not come right out and tell the doctor my reason; I supposed that he would, on his own, make the necessary assumption and proceed with whatever investigation he might believe to be indicated. He began with ears, eyes, mouth, and throat, and continued with heart, lungs, stomach, and intestines. All carefully tapped, listened to, or probed. Then he broadjumped to my knees, legs, and feet, and found everything in good order. The examination was over.

It seems to me that religious people who write about themselves do pretty much what Dr. U. did. They discourse about everything except what applies to the vital zone. Or if they do discuss the subject it will be swathed in generalities. We learn everything superficial about the biographer's situation at the rational level. He may reveal factors concerning the second part of Ramakrishna's formula, greed or self-aggrandisement. But he will tell very little about his erotic nature and how he dealt with it, which must have been all his life a throbbing reality and unsettling problem.

Consider the people in a subway car. Sitting quietly, reading, knitting, looking about vacantly. All so innocuous. But where are their minds? Dear Reader, where is yours rather oftener than you care to admit? Caught up in sensual daydreaming. Just below the surface, ever ready to assert itself, squats the erotic impulse. Many researchers have confirmed this. Lately we have seen the statistics concerning priests and why so many of them wish to give up their calling. Loneliness is the reason they give; that is to say, they find it impossible to handle, as celibates, their sensual urges. A self-examined person, if he be frank, will admit the strength of the erotic drive. I speak thus because it has been so with me. I do not

confess this with embarrassment or shame. I face the fact as a member of the human race. Who built lust into us, anyway? How is a person who wishes to devote himself to spiritual life to deal with this powerful aspect of his nature?

So I cannot, in this attempt to examine in depth the making of a devotee, do as Dr. U. did. I cannot ignore that aspect of my psycho-physical being which has had such an important effect on my struggle to attain to a high ideal.

I follow the example of several Indian scriptures, which face the fact of lust without pussyfooting, and of Sri Ramakrishna who dealt with the problem of the erotic impulse boldly. Of course I shall treat the subject circumspectly. In earlier versions of this chapter I was openly confessional--almost as much so as was St. Augustine in his world-renowned autobiography! This I decided would never do if I were to hope to see *The Making of a Devotee* published with the blessing of our Order. Swamis are supposed to have nothing at all between the stomach and the knees. Or at least not to admit too openly that they do!

3.

Once Swami Prabhavananda and I were sitting in the living room of the convent at Santa Barbara when a new probationer, a beautiful young woman, passed through the room. We both looked intently at her. My guru turned to me and said: "That is the real maya, Prema." And I realized with a start that this holy man, my ideal and my spiritual master, must have had to struggle against the flesh, and was perhaps obliged to struggle still, as I was struggling.

Swami Prabhavananda used to tell the story of how--or so he suspected--the Catholics, who opposed and perhaps feared him, had tried to discredit him when he first began his work in Hollywood. They employed one of the oldest of tactics, the wiles of a temptress. In the first years at Ivar Avenue (later Vedanta Place), when there were few friends and no other monastic members, Prabhavananda performed the puja every morning. This meant that he was often alone for an hour every day in the shrineroom, although devotees were permitted to come to meditate at that time if they wished to. An attractive young woman began coming regularly to attend the ritual. One day when no one else was present she seated herself in the shrineroom in plain sight of the pujari (Swami Prabhavananda) in a position that could only be called provocative. Sensing danger, Swami quit the worship seat and walked out of the temple. After that he arranged for some other person to be present when he did the ritual. The mysterious meditator soon stopped attending.

The young, of course, assume that sexuality is the concern only of the young, and that with age it will gradually disappear. This is not true, as research has shown (see, for example, Dr. Sherman J. Silber's *The Male*), as close observation of others will testify, and as I, now aged, can state from experience. Swami Atulananda (Gurudas Maharaj) mentioned his own situation in a conversation published in *Atman Alone Abides*. Then in his seventies, the Swami spoke of the occasional occurrence of lust, as a kind of itch, which he had learned to disregard. The erotic element must be dealt with all one's life. Whereas the human body ages, the erotic impulse remains vigorous. In old age power to perform sexual

acts no doubt diminishes, but in many individuals the desire for them remains fresh and green. No matter how old one becomes in years, one is potentially the ardent adolescent, in phantasy. "Lust hides the Atman in its hungry flames," declares the Bhagavad-Gita, "the wise man's faithful foe."

Once, troubled by lust, I asked my guru when that so bothersome impulse would abate. In reply he made a gesture of smoke rising from a funeral pyre and sighed: "When the body is reduced to ashes, and not before." Then he added, "Of course realization will accomplish it too." Death or samadhi--take your choice!

4.

A feeling that I must somehow deal with my sensual nature was a major factor in the crisis which arose in me at age thirty. I had begun to see that despite its attractions, sexuality was generally a bad bargain. Its expression seemed always to demand more in terms of anxiety and botheration than it was worth.

It was at this point that I met Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, the great zoologist. Remember, this was in the mid-1940's before his first volume "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" (1948) had been published, and before the revelations which it contained--so supportive of Ramakrishna's contention as to the pervasiveness of the sex impulse--had become the part of common knowledge which they are today. Lyle Spencer, President of Science Research Associates, was enthusiastic about Kinsey's work and hoped to publish his books. It is astonishing to remember that forty years ago Kinsey's efforts were considered dubious. He was poorly financed, and when published there was in many quarters disbelief concerning and repudiation of his findings. But it is widely agreed now that Alfred Kinsey should be classed as the same kind of pioneer in his field as were Galileo and Darwin in theirs; he shone a scientific light on one of the most important aspects of human behavior--which had been up until his time an area mostly of speculation, half-secrecy, and hypocrisy.

Dr. Kinsey was committed to rigorous statistical techniques for arriving at his theories and supporting his conclusions. He obtained data as to the sexual preferences and activities of men--his first book was confined to the male--by interviewing a large and representative cross section of the American male population. It was an extremely searching (and confidential, since the identity of the subject and all responses were registered in code) inquiry into all aspects of one's sexual life. On the basis of these inquiries Kinsey established and published his findings as to the behavior patterns in the human male.

Dr. Kinsey and his associates preferred to interview all members of any group with which they worked. They felt that this insured representativeness, as sexual behavior was believed to vary according to social and educational levels. Subjects were not easy to recruit, and Lyle felt he was doing science a service and Dr. Kinsey a favor in inviting the Indiana University team to interview all the members of our organization, from the janitor to the president. Our employees were given an afternoon or morning off with no reduction in salary in order to go to the team's hotel suite for their interviews.

I had several conversations with Dr. Kinsey, and I found him one of the kindest, most understanding

persons I had ever met. He knew everything about the so-called darker side of human tendencies and accepted people as they were. He was like a saint in his capacity to witness and not judge. When I decided to leave Science Research Associates to seek a way of life more compatible with my ideals, I wrote Dr. Kinsey to tell him so. I guard among my keepsakes the letter of encouragement which he sent in response.

When I went for my rendezvous it was Dr. Wendell B. Pomeroy who interviewed me, or, according to the terminology used by Dr. Kinsey's staff, recorded my history. Dr. Pomeroy proceeded in a professional fashion, evincing no reaction to the answers I gave him. Such was not the case with me. Verbalizing my sexual history with complete honesty was agonizing because it all seemed so tawdry. By the time the hour was over I had had a good look at myself and felt positively ill. It was clear that I had become caught up in "all that" in the very way, long before, I had cried out to my mother my hope that I should not be.

I agonized with St. Paul: "For the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do.... I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind.... O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" It was then that the idea of monastic life reasserted itself. Since I was sure that there could be no satisfactory accommodation with the erotic impulse, I must abjure it altogether. Was I willing? Could I? To cut off anticipation of imagined delights seemed unthinkable, but was there any alternative? In due course, motivated by the hope that I might begin a life of purity, I made the momentous shift from Chicago to Southern California and eventually to the little Taj on Ivar Hill.

5.

Human beings express their sexual impulses in a far greater diversity of fashions than had previously been recognized. This is one of Dr. Kinsey's fundamental findings. So-called deviant sexual preference is far more common than had been supposed--hence, if one uses the statistical yardstick--not strictly deviant at all. One may suppose that this discovery has released numerous individuals from lives of guilt and furtiveness. Sri Ramakrishna stressed candor, openness, as requisites for growth. The liberalization of attitudes concerning so-called deviant preferences, resulting from Dr. Kinsey's revelations, will have allowed many to join the company of aspirants who might not have felt sufficiently worthy to do so under the old dispensation.

In any case, the Vedantist will see "normal" or "deviant" preferences as determined by karmic forces built up in previous lives. Questions of normality or abnormality, rightness or wrongness, do not apply. It becomes interesting thus to speculate on, to advance theories about, the causes of sexual preference from a Vedantic point of view. The cause of sexual preference has remained a problem about which western psychological research has not been able to come to any clear conclusion. The most frequently stated theory is that of influences in childhood. The attitudes of the parents to each other and to the child, their training methods, and the atmosphere of the home--these, it has been claimed, will point the young child toward a future as a heterosexual, or as a homosexual, or as an individual, of whom there are

probably more than is commonly recognized, having preferences pointing in the two directions. Western authorities on the subject have identified the formative factors as pertaining to earlier and earlier phases of the young child's life. Dr. Silber, in his book on the male, states that future sexual preference is fixed within the first eighteen months of the child's life, and thinks that the birth experience itself and even prebirth thoughts on the mother's part may contribute to the child's eventual erotic disposition. This, more or less, is the prevalent attitude of psychologists and psychiatrists today.

But a recently published book from the Alfred C. Kinsey Institute for Sex Research, *Sexual Preference*, disputes all early-influence theories in finding that, statistically, the early influences in the lives of future homosexuals do not vary significantly from those in the lives of future heterosexuals. An extensive Institute study revealed that there is no valid correlation between early family influence and adult sexual preference, and therefore that sexual preference must result from, as the report phrases it, "some early, presumably biological, propensity". The researchers hint that some up-to-now unidentified biological "choice" may be involved.

"Propensity" is a very loose word. "Choice" is nearer the point. Why, then, do we not turn to the individual himself? Why load the blame for so-called deviant preferences in their offspring on the parents of such children, who are certainly on the whole as conscientious and generally as well or poorly adjusted as the parents of so-called normal individuals? The Vedantic theories of reincarnation and karma give a plausible explanation for sexual preference. An individual returns to this world granted the opportunity to fulfill previously unrealized desires and to make recompense for faults previously committed. Many rewards and punishments, and opportunities for try-out experiences, will pertain to the sexual realm. Taking birth, for example, as a homosexual affords the jiva, the individual soul, so-called fulfillments (which he or she may have craved) not generally accessible to him or her as a heterosexual. And particular frustrations also. Every disposition involves appropriate compensations--and concomitant drawbacks. For example, marriage may be felt to be enslaving and excessively boring; but promiscuity may be found to be dehumanizing. With a bit of ingenuity one could imagine which unexpressed cravings in the past, which sexual frustrations, may have created which predispositions in the present.

The sexual preferences which a person manifests are thus his own "choice", his own "fault", to be used by him, or not, for his eventual maturation and spiritual growth. "We have," my guru often repeated, "all gone through many things." The fact of so-called deviant tendencies, it may be said, is one proof that there exists, available to all, universal justice and freedom.

We are here indeed very much in the realm of speculation. I know of no satisfying scientific evidence, or even scriptural authority, relating to sexual orientation as coming from karmic causes. But some concurrence might be gained from a passage in the Bhagavad-Gita stating that the body we now have was formed by desire; and Buddhist tradition quotes the Master as having said: 'All that one is is the result of what one has thought'. Swami Vivekananda in his *Inspired Talks* says: "Past lives have molded our tendencies....Each tendency shows the life-work of the past, the line or radius along which that man must move." The logic of the Vedantic idea is attractive, even in the absence of objective data. As I have said, it would be possible to speculate as to which karmic causes produce which preferential consequences. But since presuming such cause-and-effect relationships must remain in the realm of pure

supposing, I shall refrain.

The principle behind it all, as the Upanishads proclaim, is the law of justice and freedom. "You pays your money," as the old and ungrammatical saying goes, "and you takes your choice!" Or better to say, "You takes your choice and you pays your money." The theme of existence as the Vedantist sees it is that the jiva is given the "right" to try everything, run through the maze of sexual and other expression in every conceivable fashion, in order to learn the futility of seeking lasting joy in the senses, in order to reject the maze. He is offered an unlimited number of lives for this research, and unlimited psycho-physical vehicles with which to test out all the combinations and permutations. Physical attributes, such as great beauty for example, or conversely, defects and abnormalities, can be accounted for in this light. Till at last the time-traveler heeds the ancient offer: "Give up vain strivings and come to me." Which is to say, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest".

This is why self-knowledge and self-acceptance are so important. Admit to oneself, and indeed admit openly if one wishes to, that this is what I am; this is the persona I myself have created. I am thus and so, and I accept responsibility for what I am; but by becoming a devotee I can grasp a chance to remake myself according to a preferable model.

Having been and done everything, we should, consequently, accept everything. Tolerance, acceptance--this is what belief in the theory of karma and reincarnation fosters. Having been a woman, many different types of woman, is part of our destiny; as is having been a man, many different dispositions of man. Having been "normal", having been "deviant"--all this so that one shall one day choose to become neither woman nor man, neither so-called normal nor so-called deviant, but That which one truly is.

6.

As I have persisted in the quest for purity since entrance into religious life, I have reached, quite naturally, several conclusions concerning the subject of sexual continence.

Considering the strength of the erotic element and its persistence, and considering the fact that it is so inextricably bound up with the appeal of beauty--which is surely an attribute of the Divine--what is so undesirable about giving the senses all the expression they crave? I could never accept puritanical objections to human pleasure as sinful. I recognize the fact that erotic fulfillment is overwhelmingly important to most people and to do without it nearly impossible. As I have come to see the matter, it is simply that there are preferable alternatives.

For one thing, the sexual impulse, if permitted expression, keeps one locked inside the prison-house of maya. There is nothing more karma-producing than sex. Reflect on the humiliating, dangerous, enslaving, and extravagant lengths to which the pursuit of "love" forces individuals to go. The involvements, the dissimulation, the hypocrisy, the betrayals--and the expense! All consequences of "love" and all components of maya--maya which produces karma, which produces more maya, and ad infinitum. Since the devotee is trying to break out of maya, he must tackle maya at maya's fountainhead.

In a remarkable statement anticipating Sigmund Freud, Sri Ramakrishna said: "If a person possessed by an evil spirit becomes conscious that he is so possessed, the evil spirit at once leaves him. Similarly the jiva which is possessed by the evil spirit of maya, on realizing that he is so possessed, becomes at once free from it." It is not an unrewarded struggle. In course of time the taste of the spiritual aspirant begins to change. A refinement sets in, so that gross physical expression begins to appear unaesthetic. Lust may draw him toward expression, but a sense of nicety, of abstemiousness, will warn him off. The clamor of the senses and what they promise but do not deliver strike him increasingly as a swindle.

There is, furthermore, the theory of ojas. Writers and teachers concerned with yoga often refer to such a force which is said to develop as sexual expression is curbed. It is said that the practice of continence causes a "nerve" to form which communicates with the mind, giving the mind an extraordinary power to progress in its pursuit of enlightenment. It is said that if one maintains complete continence over a period of twelve years one will achieve illumination.

If taken literally this theory raises several problems. What it seems to say is that mere abstinence from the expenditure of semen leads to the formation of ojas. (Everyone knows that athletes and other performers often choose to remain continent in advance of important trials of strength or skill.) But suppose one were to submit to a vasectomy--which would result in the semen produced by the gonads being absorbed in the system; or one were to be castrated. Would that aid in bringing about the desired result; would that produce ojas? What did Paul mean by the phrase that one must become a eunuch for the glory of God? And this theory of ojas, if it refers specifically to the retention of semen, is clearly male-centered. What would be the counterpart for women? A hysterectomy?

I do not know of any clear explanation of the theory of ojas in terms acceptable to anyone not choosing to believe in it. One of Dr. Kinsey's findings was that frequent sexual activity appeared to have no deleterious effect on individuals' physical or mental health, and we know that some of the world's most creative individuals were extremely active sexually. The explanations in Hindu literature are vague and moralistic in tone. And as far as I know no rigorous research on the subject in modern terms has been reported. My first tendency is to feel that the main advantage of continence is karmic and aesthetic.

On the other hand, there must be something to the theory of ojas, since Hindu thinkers of great perception have long supported it. Swami Muktananda, a modern holy man of recognized eminence, in his *In the Company of a Siddha* expresses strong support for the theory of ojas. I suspect that the problem of acceptance for critical minds stems from the fact that ojas seems always to be explained in physiological terms, which makes one think of physical causes and effects. Perhaps if the theory of ojas were expressed instead in psychological terms it would seem more logical. The famous German sex therapist, Dr. Ruth Westheimer says, "Sex takes place in the brain, not between the waist and the knees."

Swami Vivekananda attempts to deal with the subject of ojas in his book *Raja Yoga*. He takes up the matter in the chapter on "The Control of Psychic Prana". He says:

...The yogis claim that of all the energies that are in the human body the highest is what

they call "Ojas". Now this Ojas is stored up in the brain, and the more Ojas is in a man's head, the more powerful he is, the more intellectual, the more spiritually strong.... Now in every man there is more or less of this Ojas stored up. All the forces that are working in the body in their highest become Ojas. You must remember that it is only a question of transformation... The Yogis say that that part of the human energy which is expressed as sex energy, in sexual thought, when checked and controlled, easily becomes changed into Ojas.... He tries to take up all his sexual energy and convert it into Ojas. It is only the chaste man or woman who can make Ojas rise and store it in the brain.... That is why in all religious orders in the world which have produced spiritual giants you will always find absolute chastity insisted upon.

Unfortunately (in my eyes), even Swamiji uses physiological terms, such as "head", "brain", "storing up". A useful talk with an eminent Bengali physician and student of yoga (and disciple of Swami Abhedananda) confirmed my own reservations. He is Dr. Shyamal Sen, formerly director of Medicine of the Institute of Postgraduate Education and Research, Calcutta. Dr. Sen confessed to mystification as to the meaning of the theory of ojas as usually expressed and objected to the idea that the mere retention of semen is an essential be-all and end-all of spiritual advancement.

Dr. Sen explained that in laboratory researches stimulation by electrical pulsations of the pleasure center in the brain will cause a laboratory animal to reject sex and food. What the yogi is doing in observing chastity is learning to stimulate a "pleasure center" of his organism by alternate means and so obtain a different species of pleasure. Spiritual experience--ecstasy, samadhi--must result from stimulation of some so-called pleasure center. But there are pleasures and pleasures. To obtain mystical experience it is clearly seen that the yogi has to learn to develop reaction patterns (or "nerve" channels) other than those relating to erotic sensations.

Let us speculate, hence, from a psychological point of view, what really may be meant by ojas. It is well understood that every human being possesses "instinctive energy". In common speech this is called drive. When this drive is associated with sexual thrust it may be called libido. What is perceived with the senses or thought of in the mind produces pleasurable emotional and indeed physiological reactions. Seeing a possible sex object or thinking of one may well cause the psychic energy to run in a sexual direction and convert itself into libido. The subject experiences what is called arousal; to use a common expression, it is said that he is "turned on". Generally arousal terminates in some sort of sexual expression.

But this chain of events which results in expenditure of psychic energy on a sexual level can be diverted at its inception. Thus the idea of "storing up"; that is to say, instinctive energy may be forestalled from turning into libido and used otherwise. To effect this consciously and habitually is what is meant by the often used term: "conquering the senses". What this involves in practice is that possible identification with erotic sights or thoughts will be habitually sidetracked at the outset.

One's instinctive energy is thus available to be applied elsewhere. That "elsewhere" of course is the

search for God, the discovery of the Atman, the development of an identification with the Highest--call it what you will. Obviously there must exist a surpassingly high objective; no one can hope to perform the manipulation I describe, no one would subvert sensation from the lower pleasure center, were he not to feel an overwhelming motivation to do so. That motivation has been called a passionate longing for God.

The process is easy to comprehend, albeit difficult to accomplish. The devotee constructs a sort of psychological roadblock to stop energy from transforming itself into libido. That roadblock is constructed of spiritual disciplines--of "constant remembrance", of thoughts of God, aided and abetted by japam and meditation. Instinctive energy thus remains available to be transformed into something else, and that something else we may deduce is what has been called ojas. It is this ojas which is capable of reconstituting one's subconscious, that is to say, one's mind. A case history of one such modification of mind appears in Section 1 of Chapter Eight in which describe the discipline of purascharana. The process has many counterparts, on a different level, with what is said to occur in successful psychotherapy. Something happens to make the patient "better". Psychiatrists are just as much at a loss to explain precisely how and why psychological transformations occur as is the spiritual therapist.

Ojas may thus be understood not as a physical substance or a "nerve" but as a force triggering a process. The characteristic of the rebuilt subconscious--or better to call it mind--will be its spiritual dimension. Its contents and motivations will be such as to conduct its possessor to realization. This is what Sri Ramakrishna was referring to when he said: "The mind is all."

I realize that this explanation is crude, leaving much to be desired in terms of precision. But I can accept it as psychologically tenable. I would hope that the subject of ojas might be investigated by trained psychologists and stated eventually in respectable psychological terms. I should think that a scientific study of this subject would attract some intrepid researcher.

Whether they explain it in terms of ojas or otherwise, those who practice abstinence report beneficial psychological and spiritual effects. The celibate feels that he is attempting something which should merit a response from his own higher faculties--he is offering a sacrifice to idealism. His conscience becomes clear and he feels that he has a right to, as it were, lay claim to grace.

7.

The practice of continence brings many rewards, but it surely is not easy to enforce. Not quite like, for example, quitting smoking "cold turkey". The desire for erotic satisfaction cannot be got rid of once and for all; it has to be esewed continually.

Several techniques exist which have been found helpful in subverting the natural thrust of the libido.

Clearly an essential means of reinforcing continence is the avoidance of the consideration of erotic possibilities. Saint Anthony's celebrated bout with "every temptation the Devil could devise" has

inspired a good deal of western art and, among other literary exegeses, a famous novel by Gustave Flaubert. Buddha's struggle with Mara is equally well known. Here we witness the conspiracy of the samskaras attempting to force the renunciate to consider--or perhaps the brutal fight he had to wage after he had considered. Fantasizing--and continence is a powerfully inventive fantasy-producer--must be given a blow before it can begin unreeling its images of proffered delights. Anyone who has learned to watch his own mind marvels at the mind's capacity to change direction from due north to due south with utmost facility, to make dizzying 180-degree turns of direction without warning.

Or one may try to work up on aesthetic grounds an acute distaste for sensual expression. Sri Ramakrishna's technique useful in dealing with the erotic impulse was radical. Ah, what an outspoken realist he was! Here was his formula for provoking dispassion, spoken to the compiler of the Gospel, M.: "Don't you hate yourself for dallying with a body which contains only blood, phlegm, filth, and excreta? He who contemplates the Lotus Feet of God looks on even the most beautiful woman as mere ash from the cremation ground. To enjoy a body which will not last and which consists of such impure ingredients as intestines, bile, flesh, and bone! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

In addition, age does help, in a certain way. One of the advantages of being old is that it reduces the danger of risk of failure by misadventure. Knowing ahead of time that any advances the aged and the ugly might make would probably be rebuffed is cooling to any accidental flurry of ardor. One's unattractiveness becomes one's shield and buckler. Still, as my guru often said, "You are never safe as long as you are in the body." I have often prayed: "Dear Lord, be gracious and don't tempt me. Don't put an easy possibility at my disposal, for who knows what I might do?" And since the beginning of my sadhana he has complied--much on one or two occasions--I confess it--to my momentary disappointment. After the occasion had passed, I of course thanked him. Sri Ramakrishna said, "He is a genuine hero who, encountering a willing woman in a lonely place, casts his eyes down and addresses her as mother."

Finally, a classic technique is to make the Lord himself and only the Lord one's lover. The story of Sri Krishna and the Gopis at Brindaban and the Biblical Song of Solomon are celebrations of this attitude. ("Oh," the church people explained, in response to my red-faced question after having read for the first time the explicit love lines in the Song of Solomon, "that book is a lyrical evocation of God's love for his Church.") Pooh! But is it so easy to transmute the beauty which attracts us at every turn--beauty which is at once a trap and an agent for springing the trap--into divine beauty? Beauty is, as a sage such as Socrates marveled, so godlike in its aspect that the adorer cannot conceive of anything but spiritual goods resulting from concourse with it. Beauty is maya's cleverest secret agent, adept at penetrating the sadhak's carefully built defenses. For the spiritual aspirant it is wise not to look upon beauty too long or too intensely, delicious and seemingly innocent as that form of pleasure may seem. Plato, one remembers, severely condemned the aesthetic, as an enemy of the spiritual.

Beauty is indeed an aspect of the Divine, but how to separate the Principle of Beauty from the physical vehicle and tender trap in which it presents itself--so capable, if touched, of adding new and unwanted chapters to one's karma? The object the aspirant embraces with his eyes--or arms--is not at all that which he would embrace. What he is attempting to embrace is hidden somewhere else, out of reach.

For beauty transforms itself so seductively, accommodating itself so marvelously well to the wishes of the seeker. In effect, the seeker, or the seeker's craving, or to call a spade a spade, plain lust--magician-like invents the very beauty that justifies the lust. What an entrapper thou art, O maya!

The lover, as Shakespeare said, "sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt". "Beauty is a terrible and awful thing," wrote Dostoevski in *The Brothers Karamazov*... "I cannot bear the thought that a man of noble heart and lofty mind sets out with the ideal of the Madonna and ends with the ideal of Sodom. What's still more awful is that the man with the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not renounce the ideal of the Madonna and in the bottom of his heart he may still be on fire, sincerely on fire for the beautiful ideal, just as in the days of his youthful innocence. Yes, man's heart is wide, too wide indeed...what the intellect regards as shameful often appears splendidly beautiful to the heart."

Nevertheless Pure Beauty remains supreme, untouched by craving and the debasing which they would make--remains the sort of ultimate come-on man would labor toward. The way of Bhakti Yoga is offered as a technique for making one's own the One whom one really passionately desires. Listen to Swami Vivekananda:

...Even in the lowest kinds of attraction there is the germ of divine love. One of the names of the Lord in Sanskrit is Hari, and this means that He attracts all things to himself. He is in fact the only attraction worthy of human hearts. Who can attract a soul really? Only He! Do you think dead matter can truly attract the soul? It never did and never will. When you see a man going after a beautiful face, do you think that it is the handful of arranged material molecules which really attracts the man? Not at all. Behind those material particles there must be and is the play of divine influence and divine love. The ignorant man does not know it, but yet, consciously or unconsciously, he is attracted by it and it alone. So even the lowest forms of attraction derive their power from God himself...The Lord is the real magnet, and we are all like iron filings; we are being constantly attracted by Him, and all of us are struggling to reach Him. All this struggling of ours in this world is surely not intended for selfish ends. Fools do not know what they are doing; the work of their life is, after all, to approach the great magnet. All the tremendous struggling and fighting in life is intended to make us Go to Him ultimately and be one with Him.

Thus of various techniques, a most useful one is the development of the habit of transmuting every observed beauty into divine beauty. The heart which leaps, perhaps, in observing some excellent orderliness in architecture, or rejoices at the sound of some favorite music, or is stirred by the loveliness of a flowery field in summer, may learn to extrapolate automatically the Principle from these material evidences. "There is a sadhu in Hrishikesh," Ramakrishna told M., "who gets up early in the morning and stands near a great waterfall. He looks at it the whole day and says to God: 'Ah, you have done well! Well done! How amazing!' He doesn't practice any other form of japa or austerity. At night he returns to his hut." One may learn, when swept off one's feet by the breathtaking contour of an exquisite face, automatically to bow in praise before the Sculptor who has structured bone and flesh so artfully. Don't

fall for the evidence, but for what's behind it. This is turning lust into ojas, drive into constant remembrance, love into Love, and beauty into Beauty. The trick is to do this habitually, automatically.

As evidence that something is happening, that a renewal of his mind is taking place, the devotee discovers that his preference for particular loves is being replaced by a kind of freefloating non-particularized affection. The word "tapas" means "austerity"; it also means "warmth". The devotee experiences an inner warming in relation to others, to his Ideal, and--not least--toward that very unlovable entity which has caused him so much difficulty, himself. And suddenly he understands that this is what happiness is.

8.

Did the shift to Ivar Hill pay off? How well have I succeeded in escaping "all that"? Well enough to feel eternally grateful that I made the effort, not well enough to have perfectly satisfied my ideal. And so the struggle goes on, till the problem is definitively solved in the cremation oven! And after that? Rebirth, as a result of what one has wished for this time, as one of those pure children who so delighted Ramakrishna? Perhaps. A future existence as spirit only, in some non-earthly sphere, unassaulted by that itch which Spinoza called "nothing but a species of madness". Perhaps. In any case, as for the here and now, I would not have missed what Maharaj called "the fun of the struggle" for anything.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Four

The Devotee as Disciple

1.

In 1948 when I arrived in Southern California to begin my new life, I cast about to find out what to do with myself. I was unemployed, short of money, and very anxious about my future. I didn't want to start all over again a business career, and yet I wasn't sure that I was ready to ask to become a probationer at the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Swami Prabhavananda wisely suggested that I complete my doctor's degree, toward which I already had some credits, thus using my time in a positive way while trying to get my bearings.

So I enrolled at the University of Southern California and in a year or two gained my doctorate. I wanted to choose a subject for my thesis acceptable to the Education Department in which I was enrolled, while at the same time expanding my study of my new-found enthusiasm, Vedanta. So I proposed as the subject of my research the educational techniques of the Indian guru". How times have changed! The term "guru" was unfamiliar to most of the members of my doctoral committee of professors. But they accepted my proposal, and by June, 1951, the three-hundred-page thesis had been written and accepted: "The Guru Principle in Indian Education".

It is not a very remarkable work. It recounted the guruship activities of Swami Brahmananda and others, comparing and contrasting such with the practices of western educators and contemporary therapists. The conclusion was that "introjection" is the secret of the guru-disciple process. By identifying with a desired quality in the preceptor the student somehow succeeds in exhibiting the same quality in himself.

Well, a great many years have passed since 1951 and I have had more than sufficient opportunities to reflect upon the guru concept, as will be seen from the pages which follow. Not in theory but in vivid operation. I now reject the conclusion I came to in my thesis, for I know now that those qualities evoked by the guru are already in the disciple, though latent. The preceptor, as Vivekananda said, is a gardener, who pulls the weeds away, cultivates the soil, adds the fertilizer of his own example and the water of his love. But the plant grows as a result of its own innate force.

Hence the Indian saying: "Wonderful is the disciple and wonderful is the teacher."

Another Indian proverb proclaims that everyone gets the kind of guru he deserves. I would modify this idea slightly to say that we go from guru to guru in ascending order as our learning grows and our needs advance. Or that we are vouchsafed various "upagurus"--noble examples--from whom we can extract lessons. When we are young, an interesting teacher, an athlete, an artist, a singing or acting personality may inspire admiration and emulation. The admired person may function as a guru, or upaguru, without his being aware of it. Edna St. Vincent Millay was a splendid beginning guru for me. As we perfect our

talents or manifest our tendencies we seek exemplars possessing qualities of ascending value. And as our proficiency augments we become increasingly capable of recognizing proficiency in others and profiting from it. Thus Vivekananda's astonishing remark at the end of his life: "Only another Vivekananda could appreciate what this Vivekananda has done." In an aware, developing person the process continues indefinitely, because the ultimate guru is God. As a devotee grows more Godlike he appreciates the Divine more and more and sees himself and all other creatures as God's infinite manifestations. Curiously, we look outside, and look and look, in order, eventually, to get back to ourselves, but a very different ourselves. Aiding and abetting this process is the guru principle.

2.

I could list a number of individuals from whom I have learned. I salute, with love and appreciation, each of them. Some have given me beautiful experiences, some bitter; most a mixture of the two. But each influence was necessary to make of me a devotee and produce the person I have become.

In amour I was well instructed, but as I have indicated, some built-in discrimination cautioned: "This is not enough." One couldn't enjoy the apple for the worm one knew would eventually emerge.

I was to have a great spiritual guru and several instructive upagurus, as later pages of this book will demonstrate. But before that was to be, I had to be involved during most of the Chicago years with a superlative worldly guru. From him I learned the attraction of, and the necessity to abandon, the second component of Ramakrishna's construct of the human psyche: Greed.

I don't know whether I can write an adequate description of Lyle Spencer. Some who read these pages will remember him, for he became a prominent figure in education and business. Only his early death prevented Lyle from becoming a truly national personality. He had at any rate by the end of his life become extremely powerful and wealthy. The "New York Times" devoted two columns to his obituary, and the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) brought out a memorial booklet, after Lyle's death, commemorating his achievements.

I saw Lyle at first as an angel of light, but later he became for me, I fear, the Tempter. When our association began in 1941 I was thrilled by the vista Lyle opened up for me--interesting "new frontier" work and a chance to serve humanity. Seven years later, when leaving him, I had to keep Mephistopheles in mind in order to steel myself to make the break. Our association was a replay of "Citizen Kane", with Lyle taking Orson Wells's part and me Joseph Cotton's.

In 1939 Lyle and a friend named Robert Burns formed in Chicago a publishing company called Social Science Research Associates, later called simply Science Research Associates or SRA. "Time" magazine wrote up the fledgling company in 1940. I joined SRA on January 1, 1942, and was there till I left for Los Angeles in May of 1948. What I learned from Lyle was the excitement of having power--how to get it, how to extend it, how to enjoy it. In short, the components of Greed. This is something everyone ought to learn, so that he can find out that the possession of power doesn't solve any of the ultimate

problems of life, indeed only aggravates them.

Lyle was two years older than I and of a wider cultural background. He'd already gained an M.A. degree, had been an international debater, had been named Young Man of the Year by the International Chamber of Commerce, and had traveled widely. His father was a university professor, but there had been a divorce and his mother had married a second time, to an astute businessman who had become a millionaire.

But the business mentality, and business success, were elements which, when we became acquainted in 1941, Lyle despised. Lyle's credo was that such old values were finished; they only produced human problems. A new way was needed, a scientific way, led by trained men of good will. Social scientists would study human beings, arrange human goals, and ordain means by which man could progress toward such goals in a satisfactory manner. We would be leaders in the new profession of human engineering.

Of course this call appealed to me, as I considered myself to be a man of good will ready to work for human betterment. Much of our publishing activity was devoted to preparing and bringing out psychological tests, the idea being that by learning enough about the individual through evaluating him, educators could guide him to vocational and personal choices which accommodated his individual preferences and pointed him toward a satisfying life. I felt with Lyle that all human variables could one day be measured and that personal and interpersonal problems, as a consequence, could be solved. Whether Lyle actually believed this, I never knew. He often spoke of an *Ž*lite of men of good will attaining power and adjusting, for their own good, individuals of lesser capacity. We were, of course, among the *Ž*lite, who would oversee the adjusting. As I look back on this notion now I see how close it was to fascist thinking.

A siren song which only someone in his twenties, and an idealist, would listen to and heed. But it did sound plausible, and Lyle was a born charmer. Well, I went along with the proposition. Throughout the 1940's I played the social scientist and ran SRA. I wrote articles, edited books, made speeches, attended conventions, preaching the gospel of human adjustment through research in the social sciences. Lyle was doing somewhat the same work in relation to servicemen as a lieutenant-colonel in the U.S. Army, frequently overseas.

What I was actually doing was learning how to exert power, use others, push ahead, get rich, despise lesser men, and enjoy the fruits of greed; and for some years I enjoyed doing this. But at times I would wonder what was happening to me. I was saving others but myself I could not save. We "*Ž*lite" were all like that. I finally woke up to the fact that I was nothing but a hypocrite. I preached adjustment and was not adjusted myself. My real goal was preeminence.

I don't know what Lyle really felt toward me besides a certain gratitude for having brought SRA intact through the War. When I announced my departure to, as I cornily phrased it, go forth and seek my soul, he proffered interest, even a cooperative spirit. Of course he figured I'd soon be back, chastened and

more manageable. One of Lyle's favorite expressions was: "Never oppose people; take them into camp." Translated, this means: seduce your opponent. Yet I suspect that there was some wistfulness on his part, some feeling that maybe I was "onto something" promising. Lyle was a queer mixture of idealism and cynicism. His paramount quality was an exorable thrust for supremacy. He played at it like a game. He died owning an estate on the North Shore of Chicago, where he bred pure-blooded horses, a symbolic mark of having arrived which he would have despised earlier.

I learned thus many negative lessons from Lyle. But I learned one positive lesson from him, too, which has served me ever since the Chicago days. During the war a system of priorities was put into operation designed to control the use by the public of the rails and airlines, the idea being to insure those persons a place who were traveling on official business. To be sure of getting somewhere thus you had to possess a "priority" issued by the appropriate government agency. As I was engaged in official war tasks I could usually obtain a priority to travel. However on one occasion when I had to go from Chicago to San Francisco I could obtain a priority for a seat only as far as Kansas City, about one-third of the way. I hesitated, fearing that I might be stranded for days in Kansas City, before being able to continue on to the West Coast. Lyle's advice was: "Take the priority you can get. If you stay in Chicago, waiting for a clearance straight to San Francisco, you may never get through. Getting to Kansas City will open the way to the rest of the trip." I followed his advice and found that what he proposed was true. After a short wait in Kansas City I found a place on an on-going plane. The lesson being, make a start even if the conclusion is not clear in advance. Making a start guarantees a successful conclusion far more surely than waiting until the whole route is clear.

We met once more, in 1961, when I stopped in Chicago on a farewell visit to old scenes before taking sannyas. After touring the new, impressive SRA premises, we had dinner together at a famous restaurant on the Near North Side. I had been a monastic probationer for ten years and in Lyle's eyes had wasted my time and my talent. "You could have become an internationally renowned editor," was his reproach. Lyle had become a figure of power, was a director on many boards, had, through shrew professional coups, built SRA into a big concern so that the value of its stock had doubled and doubled and split many times over. Soon SRA was to be amalgamated as a division of the fabulously successful International Business Machines Corporation, or IBM. Two or three marriages and divorces, many sessions at the Menninger psychiatric clinic just to see how psychoanalysis worked--during dinner he related all that he had done. Yes, I was impressed when I thought of what might have been if I'd stayed with him. And at the same time, thankful that I hadn't, and terribly sad for him.

The supreme insult on that occasion--or was it an act of affection?--came when Lyle offered to reinstall me as a director of SRA if I would come back into the fold. Here is how I recorded the meeting in my diary a day later:

April 25, 1961. Riverside Manor, Lansing, Michigan.

By jet to Chicago. Then to the Drake. I covered on foot all the places on the Near North Side I used to know. Perhaps my big event was dinner with Lyle, which broke into an

open quarrel. He considers me rigid, and meditation self-hypnosis. It started when he came back to the old invitation to join SRA again. "I resent that and consider it an insulting suggestion," I said. "Just as if I were to tell you that if SRA fails I've always got a spare bedroom you can have at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood."

"Your flaring up proves you are not sure," he shot back.

"And your saying that makes it clear that you're a very amateur social scientist," was my nasty rejoinder.

Driving back to my hotel, we were both silent. I felt desolated that my attempt at rapprochement had worked out so badly. That Lyle was furious at having been rebuffed was clear when we parted. "Well, since employment matters were discussed," he said, "I at least have the satisfaction of being able to charge this dinner off on my tax return as a business expense."

I guess we were more attached to each other than we realized.

In the chapel at Gretz, from 1966 onwards, I prayed for Lyle every morning--that I might have no ill will toward him, or him toward me, that he might find peace, reminding myself that I was thankful to him for all he had taught me and all that that teaching had allowed me to reject. This practice I continued, and soon I began to feel a renewed affection for him and desire, now that he had undoubtedly succeeded in what he had wanted to do, as I was hoping to succeed in my quest, that we might reestablish our friendship. Around 1970 I wrote to him along these lines--and received a letter from the new President of SRA telling me that Lyle had died two years before. Yes, lingeringly from cancer at fifty-seven. Oh no!

3.

I also met Paramahansa Yogananda, founder and head of the Self-Realization Fellowship.

Shortly after arriving in Los Angeles in 1948 I went to the "Los Angeles Times" to inquire, not very wholeheartedly, into job possibilities. There I met Bill Moses, the newspaper's religious editor. We liked each other at once, and I proposed two stories for him as possible illustrated Sunday features. One was a reportage on the Trabuco Monastery, just then being taken over by the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Bill did a beautiful illustrated article, which pleased Swami Prabhavananda and helped further his regard for me. The other suggestion concerned SRF, known to many because of the success of Yogananda's book, *The Autobiography of a Yogi*". An appointment was made for Bill and me to interview Yogananda at his Mount Washington headquarters. I recall that it was a Saturday. We were invited to come for lunch, a lunch which, counting the entertainment which followed the eating and the talk, was to go on till four o'clock in the afternoon.

On arriving we passed through the offices, which contained about thirty desks--a big organization even then, with worldwide branches and thousands inscribed in correspondence courses. I noticed that every desk had on it a framed portrait of the Leader.

We were conducted to the Paramahansa's top floor apartment. I had known him from the frequently seen publicity photo, with long hair and an unmistakable resemblance to Jesus. In the flesh he seemed older (he would then have been in his mid-fifties) and the hair was considerably less abundant.

During lunch, which consisted of egg curry and vegetarian items, Yogananda spoke constantly about himself, the size of the organization, the number of his adepts, the initiations he gave for various grades of attainment, his own struggles in building up the work. I remarked that I had passed an SRF restaurant somewhere down the Coast which advertised mushroomburgers. "Yes, it is I who invented the mushroomburger," he replied proudly, giving a history of how this meat substitute item had been conceived and popularized.

As this very long interview, together with the lunch, came to an end, Bill and I prepared to take our leave.

"Oh, no. You've only heard about my work, now you will see some of it." Space was made and a scene ensued that made me think of life in the court of some oriental potentate. The entertainment was given by about a dozen or twenty adolescent and pre-adolescent boys, barefooted and wearing gym outfits. They proceeded to do a series of yoga postures such as Bill and I had never seen before. The Paramahansa proudly watched his performers, commented on the exercises, explaining the value of each. At one point some of the advanced students thrust needles through cheeks and tongue and removed them without drawing blood.

The whole thing struck me very unpleasantly. Was this something I should have to accept in becoming an adept of Indian religion? I asked myself. I hoped not. What we had witnessed struck me as intensely unaesthetic and moreover carrying with it an unmistakable odor of eroticism.

It was obvious that this was not to be my way, nor the Paramahansa my spiritual guide. Later, when I gave an account of that luncheon to Swami Prabhavananda (who had known Yogananda since their younger days in Bengal) he looked quite grim. "Could it be said, Swami," I asked, in order to draw him out, "that one might classify Ramakrishna Vedanta as the Episcopalianism of Indian religious thought and the SRF people as its Holy Rollers?" Swami just looked at me disgusted.

Paramahansa Yogananda died suddenly at a banquet honoring the Indian Ambassador in Los Angeles on March 7, 1952. It was said that his body did not become corrupted; and there were plans to enshrine it on SRF grounds for future viewing; but this plan was rejected by the Los Angeles Health Department. It is now, like those of so many other former Los Angeles residents, buried at the Forest Lawn Memorial Cemetery.

I now propose to talk about Swami Prabhavananda, whose disciple I became early in the morning of Kali Puja, November 9, 1950; about my relations with him; and about how my character changed during our sixteen years together.

I shall go over some of the same ground that Christopher Isherwood covers in his *My Guru and his Disciple*; for Chris and I are brother disciples. Anyone reading Isherwood's book will see how completely he accepted the Hindu formula: The guru is God. In a personal testimony he wrote for my book *What Vedanta Means to Me*, published in 1959, Isherwood said: "What does Vedanta mean to me? Guru and mantram." In his *My Guru and his Disciple* (1980) the mantra is mentioned less; the guru has become nearly everything. For example, at the end of *My Guru and his Disciple* Isherwood poses the question: "Now that your Swami is dead, what are you left with?" and answers the question by saying: "I am left with Swami".

Most of Swami Prabhavananda's disciples regarded and regard their guru in the same fashion as Isherwood. In his last days Prabhavananda was revered as almost a living god, became an object of intense adoration. The daily audience he gave, a halting walk around the temple compound, was attended by scores of devotees. Today, more than a dozen years after his death, the attitude at the Hollywood center is one of awe that such a perfect master should have dwelt among man. The present membership of the Vedanta Society of Southern California is made up of two classes: those who knew the master and those who arrived too late to have enjoyed that privilege. A sect could easily have formed there organized around the perpetuation of the late leader's memory--as has occurred at Pondicherry and Tiruvanmalai--had not the Ramakrishna Order policy of continuation been adhered to. A new head was sent, the work continues, and profound respect for Prabhavananda, but no cultish celebration of him, is the attitude which prevails.

I never felt I dared to evaluate Swami Prabhavananda's spiritual attainments. That he was an ardent devotee of God there can be no doubt. He possessed great charisma, intense charm, and a visible intensity of conviction. Sometimes he was dazzlingly beautiful. Thus he transmitted to others the idea that the search for God, that spiritual life, could be the only important human concern. On puja days particularly, especially on the day when we celebrated Swami Brahmananda's (Maharaj's) birthday, Swami was visibly elated and bursting with love and spiritual power. Of course we disciples discussed the question of whether he had attained samadhi. He often implied that he had, but never came right out and said so. Only once I heard him respond to the question directly. A bumptious young man asked Prabhavananda if he had achieved realization. Swami replied sharply: "I am not a blind man."

Even those devotees originally skeptical fell in with the general adoration of Swami Prabhavananda as a great holy man. Here is a typical case. One of them told me that for years she had not fully accepted him, although initiated by him, and had been the object of very rough treatment from him, until all of a sudden "everything had cleared up" and she realized that the opposition she had felt and the poor relations it had induced, had been the agencies through which unhelpful tendencies in herself had been

"sandpapered away". A miraculous new point of view had replaced the old dubiousness. Now she had gained absolute faith in her guru.

I envy conviction of such intensity. But it did not rise easily in me, and no effort to induce it had any effect. Nevertheless, much that I know about spiritual life, much that went into the making of the devotee that I am trying to become, I learned from Swami Prabhavananda.

We may say, then, that what follows complements what Isherwood has written in *My Guru and his Disciple* and adds to the picture he has given us of this very special person, and the time and place where he toiled so long and so enthusiastically to turn everyday Americans into "men and women of God".

5.

In thinking about Swami Prabhavananda we have to remember that he came from a culture very different from that in which were reared most of his disciples. (I visited Swami Prabhavananda's birthplace near Bankura in Bengal in 1952 and again in 1964 and met his brothers and other members of his family.) He was born only seven years after the death of Sri Ramakrishna in an India that had not yet found its way, for better or for worse, into the modern world; a nineteenth century colony of Great Britain.

To say that Swami was an Indian is to say much, and to say that he was a Bengali is to say even more. The Indian is the bearer of attitudes developed far in the past: a strong sense of family (clan) and loyalty to it; respect for a paternalistic social hierarchy and acceptance of one's place in it; a kind of pantheistic feeling about all life--that it vibrates with spirit; an idealization of sacrifice and asceticism. Added to this is an intense pride in being descended from an old race possessing in Sanskrit a superior language and literature; and a feeling of defensiveness concerning India's relatively inferior position in the world. With the result that there is an ambivalence about the ancient values which has induced a peculiar hiatus in the cultural development of the modern Indian. (V.S. Naipaul has written much about the contradictions in the Indian character.)

All this, of course, is in the Bengali, and much more. And Swami was a Bengali of Bengalis, as he himself often stated. Sri Ramakrishna took birth in Bengal, and most of Ramakrishna's disciples were Bengalis. Rabindranath Tagore was a Bengali; so was Sri Aurobindo. Since the 1800's Bengalis have been the most enterprising, creative, and fiery of Indians; and it was because of this that the capital of India, originally at Calcutta, was removed to Delhi. The British simply felt unsafe and not in control in Bengal. Today Bengal's state government is communist.

How shall I describe the Bengali temperament? Latin, Italian, emotional, passionate. Devoid of sham and contemptuous of surface respectability. Impatient of staid and stiff people, who the Bengali sees as heartless and calculating. Capable of great generosity and charm, the Bengali is also given to suspicion and intramural squabbling. There is a popular saying in India: "Wherever there are Bengalis there will be quarrels." Swami Vivekananda often scolded his countrymen for their jealousy of each other.

Prabhavananda confessed that jealousy was one of his great defects. Were I so inclined, I could relate several instances of this; but what purpose would that serve? The fact was there, obvious to us all. This weak point also troubled and troubles me in my effort to think of my guru as a perfect being.

Indians from other parts of India find Bengalis hard to understand and live with. And the Bengali seems to find himself most truly at home with his own. After a couple of years of being assisted by a South Indian swami, Swami Prabhavananda announced at the time of that swami's departure for a new post, "I shall insist that his replacement be a Bengali." And he was. After taking sannyas in 1964 I made a month's pilgrimage to South India with a half-dozen other swamis, all Bengalis. When we finally reached Trivandrum which, although located in the state of Kerala in South India, had a Bengali swami in charge and a Bengali atmosphere, one of our group remarked: "Oh, what a relief to get back to one's own country again!"

Of course in his many years in the West, Swami Prabhavananda became urbane and cosmopolitan. He even became a naturalized American citizen. But when the chips were down he followed his own instincts, and these were unerringly Indian, Bengali.

6.

So it is natural that when Swami Prabhavananda began his work in Hollywood in about 1930 it came to be organized according to the model Swami knew best, the family, or joint family. The great joint family where the generations live together, everyone on top of everyone else, and there is no privacy and there are no secrets. Everything out in the open, while everyone speaks his mind. Visitors or other relatives are always welcome, as a few more or less are of no importance and make things more exciting.

In the small bungalow at 1946 Ivar Avenue, Hollywood, Swami became the paterfamilias, Sister Lalita (Mrs. Carrie Mead Wychoff who had been hostess to Swami Vivekananda in South Pasadena in 1900) was given the role of the head's revered mother, a surrogate for Prabhavananda's own mother in far-away Bankura, for whom he maintained an intense affection. Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Brahmananda were installed as family deities; the latter, also called Maharaj, was Swami's guru, thus was felt to be living and close; the family was under his special protection. Visiting swamis were received as elder brothers, subject to elaborate courtesies (especially tributes from the kitchen); or younger brothers, to be joked with and given advice; or, in one or two cases, brothers-in-law, subject to suspicion and quarrels.

And all the rest of us, whatever our age and whichever our sex, became the children, clustering, literally, around Father's knees. (George Fitts, later Swami Krishnananda, was only ten years younger than Swami Prabhavananda, but Swami always referred to him, even when he himself was eighty and the disciple seventy, as "that boy".)

In the opening chapters of *My Guru and his Disciple* Isherwood describes the Prabhavananda family as he had known it as a member in the early 1940's. "Oh Prema," Chris used to muse, when recalling those

years, "what a madhouse it all was, and yet how strangely comforting." Chris's success with Prabhavananda was, I suspect, that the father found this brilliant son in some ways an image of himself, for in their emotional natures--honesty, ardor, and faith--they were similar. Chris's role was favorite son, and it was a disappointment to Swami, as Chris has stated, that somehow it could not be possible for Chris to take a dominant place in the succession.

My role at first was young prodigy, but this gradually changed when it became clear that I was not capable of that total submission which Swami preferred; he didn't feel comfortable with any disciple in whom that quality was lacking. (I heard him refer to one of our number in the following terms: "I can do anything I want with her: she is my disciple.") Hence as time went on Swami appeared to develop a certain wariness toward me which turned finally into opposition. Once he complained, "Nobody ever knows what you might do." And on another occasion said: "You are a very dangerous person."

7.

The model that I arrived with, when I joined the household, was that of the business organization.

I have been a loner from the cradle onwards, possessed of what has been called a vast pride. Probably pride is the right word, or reserve, for the quality manifested itself in self-sufficiency and a horror of being beholden to anybody for anything. If people liked me and were nice to me, well and good. If not, who cared? Actually I cared a great deal but could never bring myself to be the suitor. I hated surprises and improvisations, spontaneous tentatives. I was consequently always considered cold. The easy intimacies many people seem to enjoy were largely unknown to me. I often reflected on how much I didn't know, because I could never bring myself to ask about it. Such traits of personality don't make it easy for a person to become a model disciple, especially in a Bengali household.

The reader will readily diagnose my trouble as not having come to terms with myself. And he may well be right. But with some people this is a process which cannot be hurried. It did occur, as we shall see--indeed, this transformation is what this whole book is about--but very slowly. Thus the significance of the Indian saying: "Nothing happens except at the right time." Regrettable, perhaps, but true.

Out of compensation (and astrologers might say because I was born under the sign of Leo) I became a person who made things go. I was never a natural, popular leader, but I was a good organizer--conscientious, a hard worker, a lover of order. I have seen myself since infancy standing up against the world's natural tendency to resolve itself into chaos.

I had little family sense, since mine was the western kind in which the four members maintained seemingly distances the one from the other.

When I moved in at 1946 Ivar Avenue--soon to be renamed Vedanta Place as a result of the Hollywood Freeway's leaving us only a tiny tag-end of Ivar Avenue--straight from the business world and executive chair, the atmosphere in the Prabhavananda household was still very much as Isherwood describes it.

Meals were taken irregularly by the inmates; the women wore dressing gowns sometimes till midday; there was no such thing as an office with office hours; the telephone often went unanswered and the mail undistributed; no one hesitated to express his temperament. One of the members had organized his room for the production of gourmet meals, accompanied by choice wines which he drew from a supply he had stocked in the Center's basement.

My parents, who had by then moved to California, were horrified by my interest in Vedanta and my apparent intention to order my life according to its teachings. They never wanted to meet Swami Prabhavananda but finally attended on one occasion, in response to my insistence, one of his lectures. Their sole reaction was that they found him hard to understand (because of his Indian accent) and rather dark (skin color being associated in the minds of most Americans at that time with social acceptability). On another occasion my parents came to visit me in my room. They were greeted by one of the women inmates wearing a frilly black peignoir, who conducted them to my door, just outside of which hung a life-size photo of a yogi seated in lotus posture practically nude. (It was Swami Turiyananda. Swami Krishnananda had a passion for having great blowups made of photos of holy people and hanging them on the walls wherever there was space.) It must be remembered that I am referring to the 1950's, before much light from the East had dawned in America. This was the monastery I had come to live in, the retreat from the world my reading of Vedanta literature had inspired me to seek. Naturally my parents were offended.

Yes, I had left the world to seek monastic order and tranquillity. Movie scenes of silent monks, clad in well-cut robes, moving through architecturally attractive cloisters--that's what I thought I had come to participate in. The "holy mess" I found was upsetting and would, I feared, force me to reconsider my decision. I questioned Swami Prabhavananda about this. He replied: "I keep hands off. I trust my disciples completely. Everyone is free to act as he thinks best. But remember, I also keep watch. If I see someone getting too far out of line, I pounce.' Sometimes I concluded that Swami felt that this surface confusion brought out the best in us; it forced us to break down our inhibitions and false respectability and offered us opportunities to discipline not only ourselves but each other--saving him that work! Sometimes I concluded that Swami didn't even notice the disorder. Who knows what went on in Swami's mind as he puffed cigarettes (he later quit) and looked on at temperamental clashes imperturbably? More than once he said with a deep sigh: "Ah, Prema, what patience it takes!"

8.

Swami Prabhavananda taught me respect for eminence in others and for holiness. This was something that as a brash American I'd never thought much about, or learned. Notions of the Sacred and humbling oneself were out of countenance with my previous experience, as undemocratic and demeaning. Incidents such as the first scolding I got from Prabhavananda, related in Chapter One, came regularly and began to batter my self-assurance.

I recall many lessons. One happened like this. Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was then Vice President of India. He was in Los Angeles, and Swami Prabhavananda had invited him for luncheon. Before his

arrival Swami told me, "At the end of the meal I wish to present Radhakrishnan with a copy of my translation of the Bhagavad-Gita. Get a copy, which I shall now inscribe to him, and bring it to me when lunch is over." The great man came as expected, his official Cadillac flanked by two motorcycle police. (Yes, only two; this was in the old days before the current terrorism.) All went well. As the meal seemed to be terminating and the conversation lagging I marched up with the copy of the Gita. But Swami's attention was turned elsewhere and he didn't take the book from me. Not knowing what to do, I bent down and placed the Gita on the floor where he could reach it easily when needed, and retired.

"Oh," he cried, reached down for the book, snatched it up, jumped from his chair, and placed the volume on the mantelpiece behind him.

What had I done wrong? After the departure of our guest I was told. "Scriptures are to be respected. Don't ever do such a thing as putting a holy book or other such object next to anybody's feet." This was the lesson, and I got it. But after a bit of reflection I couldn't resist teasing Swami.

"But holy mens' feet are holy," I demurred.

"No, no, no! We are the dust of the dust of the feet of holy men!" Disgustedly: "You don't understand anything."

In 1949 when Gerald Heard's Trabuco College was turned over to the Vedanta Society and became the Center's monastery, an altar was erected in the up to then bare meditation hall and daily worship instituted. Naturally special vessels for the altar, in which to serve food offerings, had to be procured--several plates and bowls and a goblet or two. Swami Prabhavananda told one of the brahmacharis to purchase what was necessary.

This brahmachari was what we in French would be called the *Źconome*, hence went about his assignment seriously. He had noticed that one of the stores in nearby Santa Ana was having a sale on tableware. He went there and purchased the necessary items at greatly reduced prices.

When the brahmachari brought these purchases back to Trabuco, explaining with satisfaction, "I got the whole setup for next to nothing," Swami Prabhavananda exploded. "What do you mean, economizing on the Lord! We give him the best, the best. Throw away all the stuff you have bought; put it in the garbage can. And go out and buy it all in silver!" An exaggeration, of course.

For Swami Prabhavananda was very practical in business matters. He understood finance and handled the Center's money affairs shrewdly. He had great faith in the stable value of property and was always glad to add to the Center's real estate holdings. He was against disposing of any land once acquired. "Remember," he said once, when I wanted to sell a bothersome building, "the Center will go on after we have departed. Unborn future residents have their rights too. You have no right to dispose of something which might be useful to them."

Another practical lesson I learned from him: "If you start something, finish it. Even if you've lost interest in it, finish it. Otherwise your mind will become fickle."

Gradually I began to feel that I was mastering Indian practices concerning purity and proper veneration for holy things. One day the news came that a certain devotee was dying and had asked to see his guru. Swami called me to him: "Get a little Ganges water from the shrine and drive me to D's house." (According to Hindu practice it is customary to give a sip of Ganges water to the dying.) I went to my room, looked about wildly for some container which would be deign to transport holy water in, finally settling on a small flacon which contained aspirin. Emptying out the aspirins, I thoroughly cleaned the bottle with hot water and soap inside an out. On the way to the devotee's house I proudly recounted my pious action to Swami, to which he replied, "Idiot, don't you know that Ganges water itself purifies everything?"

Once I reproached Prabhavananda on account of the, to me, unseeming behavior of one of his old-time disciples. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," was his laconic response. That silenced me. And once or twice I raised questions among my colleagues as to whether they thought our way of life was appropriate. I was told with some heat: "This is a family. We are not a bunch of calculating machines. We are members of a family."

I would be unjust to imply that disorder is all that there was. If so, how could such persons as Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard, the playwright John van Druten, King Vidor, the famous movie director, Somerset Maugham, and ever so many other persons of substance have been attracted? No, the Hollywood center was also a wonderful place, and sometimes in Swami's presence, when he talked of spiritual matters, or sitting before the altar in our little chapel, I felt happy and in my right place.

Swami was an example to us by regularly appearing in the chapel at meditation hours, morning and evening. We were expected to be present too. If someone did not appear for two or three times, he grew visibly worried. "I suppose you are too busy to meditate," he would remark sarcastically, "like Lady Bateman".

This was one of Swami Prabhavananda's favorite stories. Lady Bateman lived usually in Monte Carlo. During the War however this Marion Bateman, the rich widow of an English baron, and friend of Somerset Maugham, had found refuge in Southern California. She occasionally visited the Center as she found Prabhavananda charming. Once when she confronted Prabhavananda with some problem, Swami, as he did in such cases, recommended meditation.

"Meditate?" she had replied. "But Swami, when? I awake at ten, then the masseuse comes, and after her the coiffeur. Lunch doesn't finish before two-thirty or three. A bit of shopping and a look at an art gallery. Perhaps cocktails at someone's home. Dressing for dinner takes a long time. After dinner to the casino or to a party, and home very late. Now tell me, Swami, how am I ever to find the time to meditate?"

It was inevitable that I, being I, should try to take hold of the situation and, according to my lights, straighten it out--that is to say, make it more businesslike. I visualized the Center as functioning systematically, everyone knowing his job and doing it efficiently, according to an impersonal organization chart. So, no surprises. I thought of this as my mission, my form of karma yoga, and I worked at this task for the next dozen years or so. Schedules were organized and more or less followed, work was planned and supervised, publications were issued in good form and on time, direct and mailorder book sales were expanded, finances were strengthened. I felt that I was serving my guru in a way which pleased him, and he did go along with the reforms to a certain extent, although perhaps less whole-heartedly than I chose to believe.

The joint family, the business organisation. At the same time a third model insinuated itself, or tried to insinuate itself, into our community--the personality cult.

In a situation where the leader is also the guru, and the guru encourages disciples, for their own good, to submit themselves to him, all elements are present for the development of the cult of the leader. Human affection does not easily distinguish between personality and principle. The leader may not wish to be turned into a cult figure, but circumstances may force this role upon him. In all truth, being elevated to godling renders his task easier. And those who render the leader extreme homage benefit equally from the arrangement, as they become members of an Źlite, whose privileges include influence over the leader and a certain power in the ordering of the center's affairs. I do not need to discourse much on this subject, as everyone is aware, from the publicity given them in the press and television, of how frequently personality cults have affected events in church, political, and professional organizations.

Insofar as religious organizations go, the formation of the cult of the leader is, because of their natural qualities of devotion and loyalty, the special province of women; they gain a sense of security from such an arrangement which gives them weapons against the natural independence, insouciance, and superior strength of men, always feared as rivals.

The disadvantages in allowing a personality cult to develop are these: the Źlite tends to make the leader their prisoner and will try to substitute their values for his. Upward mobility by those not in the Źlite will be blocked. Suggested reforms from outside authority or from within the organization can be sabotaged. And most serious of all, at the death of the leader the organization may fall apart, producing disasters for some who have given the leader their all.

To prevent the formation of personality cults no head of center in India is allowed to initiate, and heads of centers are frequently shifted. Where the leader is the guru, as in all western centers, only the good sense of the leader and self-discipline on the part of the disciples can keep the formation of the personality cult from developing to unhelpful levels.

Prabhavananda recognized all the dangers inherent in this pattern and would sometimes talk to us about it. Often he tried in the most violent fashion to break the circle around him, crying out against those who would manipulate him. "Get out! You don't understand anything about spiritual life," I once heard him

shout. While to one of the nuns who happened to be wealthy and used her money in tactful ways for Swami's comfort and to sustain objectives which seemed significant to her, he said: "Give your money away. Throw it all away. I don't want anything from you. You don't have the least idea what renunciation means." But he felt compatible with women, sympathized with their problems, responded to their confidences, so that a sort of unspoken stalemate was the order of the day. He told me once: "Women take to spiritual life more easily than men, but they don't rise very high. Men go much slower, but they attain greater heights."

9.

Things went along for years like this, none of the models clearly prevailing. It was perhaps inevitable that eventually a fourth model should present itself--a model dictated by our headquarters at Belur Math. But more about this in a moment.

I now see that the organizational strivings on my part displeased our master. For in my effort to produce tangible results and see to it that my model prevailed, I worked too hard, became strident, became competitive, and gave too little attention to human, let alone spiritual, factors. This was not in the least karma yoga. I had to be dispatched to our hermitage a couple of times to calm down. I can still hear Swami Prabhavananda saying, "Prema, never forget that work is secondary. I don't care how much you produce. If you'd agree, I'd remove all work from you and arrange for you to spend full time in intense spiritual practice."

10.

In 1963 I went to India to take sannyas and stayed there for nearly a year. At the time of my trip to India a dozen years earlier I had been the bumptious journalist and intrepid reporter and had seen little beyond externals. Now I was to become that enviable being I had hardly dared hope ever to become, a swami of the Ramakrishna Order. I took great pleasure, as a Catholic cleric would take when for the first time visiting Rome, in learning about the operation of the Order from those senior leaders in charge at Belur Math.

What I discovered astonished me. Certain policies followed in Hollywood, which I supposed were sacrosanct and Order-wide, were not accepted at Belur Math at all. As I observed and questioned, I saw a fourth model emerge. Not the family, nor the business organization, and surely not the guru cult, but monasticism, disciplined and strongly governed from Headquarters. This is what the leaders of the Order wanted to see operating in all branches, including Hollywood.

Much of what Belur Math envisaged we were already following, of course. But several principles were mentioned which were at variance with what we practiced in Hollywood.

The first concerns obedience. For the sannyasin the sannyas guru is the supreme guru. He is the President of the Ramakrishna Order, considered to be Sri Ramakrishna's representative on earth.

Obedience rendered to the diksha guru (the guru who gives initiation) must now be superseded by this higher loyalty. In effect, Swami Madhavananda, in his capacity as supreme chief, would be my ultimate master in the future, in place of Swami Prabhavananda.

But this was to me outright heresy. We had been taught such an awe of our diksha guru--he held the life and death of our soul in his hands. We must obey him implicitly, we should never leave him, he would never leave us. "The guru is God."

Although my doctoral thesis considered this doctrine of the guru as God, I was never wholly convinced of this, or rather shall I say that I was ambivalent about what it meant. I had heard upon occasion Swami Prabhavananda tell recalcitrant disciples: "Do what I say; I am your God." But how far was this simply Bengali exuberance? And now I was led to understand that however I had comprehended the matter before, I must fit into the scheme a new allegiance to the sannyas guru, the President of the Order.

Second, I learned that the Ramakrishna Order is an organization exclusively of men and that those women who had taken sannyas in Hollywood were what the General Secretary termed as being in an anomalous situation. This discovery came at Belur Math on the day we were handed out a revised official list of sannyasins on the roll in 1963. The names of the Hollywood sannyasinis did not appear. I thought there must have been a mistake. Incensed, I rushed to the office and confronted an assistant secretary with the omission. He replied calmly: "But they're not in the Order, never have been, and never will be."

But this went against everything we had been taught. The slightest hint of male chauvanism in Hollywood had produced shouts of "woman-hater" from Swami Prabhavananda. Indeed, after I took sannyas he told me to regard those sannyasinis who were senior to me as my respected elders in the hierarchy.

Third, a sannyasin is a sannyasin, with all rights and privileges in the Order, be he of Indian origin or western. Of course, what duties he will be assigned will depend on his qualifications. This was a surprise, as we had been taught in Hollywood that Indians would always form the operating élite and that no westerner could aspire to even modest posts of leadership. We might be sannyasins but we would be sannyasins of a sort of lay-brother quality.

Fourth, western sannyasins should have the same transfer possibilities as prevail in India--reassignments effectuated by Belur Math and agreed to by the parties concerned. This too was a most astonishing principle, as we had been led to believe that for us the Benedictine principle of lifelong stability would apply and we would remain always in the center where we had joined. I was already champing at this restriction as I'd been in Hollywood for fourteen years, found that my mind had changed, and that what had challenged me in the earlier years there no longer held any great appeal.

What a surprise these revelations were!

I was now fifty years old, and loath to return to Hollywood. I thought of prolonging my stay in India but came to feel that the climate and lack of comfort there would be too difficult to adapt to. So in the fall of 1964 I returned to Hollywood in a troubled state of mind.

When I told Swami Prabhavananda what I had discovered in India--the operating principles which were considered quite normal in India but which were so different from what we had been taught by him--he was outraged. Any anger he had shown before was nothing to what he showed this time. He told me that I was all wrong and that if I believed such things I'd better leave.

I realized that in effect Swami had never budged from the model of the family. We might conceive of the Center in any manner we wished, but his idea of it was the joint family, of which he was the patriarch. Yes, this shows his greatness, his love. When it came to his children he was not rational at all, nor thinking about organizational principles or advancement factors. We were little ones at his feet and should be delighted to be such and as such to remain. This would lead more directly to the self-fulfillment we sought than any other alternative, and he may well have been right. (I understood this only gradually; my citing Belur Math principles could never have convinced, only infuriated, him.)

My mentioning of the sannyas guru as the supreme guru he considered a reflection on his own spiritual capacity. "All right," he cried, "if you can find a more spiritual man than I, go to him, become his disciple--if you can get him to accept you. I release you." He also said, on another occasion, that being guru gave a leader leverage over the disciples, and that if the President or Vice President in far-off India were to be the diksha guru (as in India), "we should lose all our power." O Swami, what an astonishing combination there was in you of holy simplicity and astute practicality!

It is to Swami's credit and proof of his modernism that he felt women should be given an equal place in the work as men. In his eyes we were not men and women as such, possibly competing for place, probably waging the war of the sexes, but innocent children. He could never see, to his dying day, why this should be otherwise, and the periodic reminders from Headquarters calling for a separation of the sexes only baffled and infuriated him. What I had been told that day by the assistant secretary he completely rejected, and I was commanded to reject it also.

There is a long history concerning this question. As early as 1894 Swami Vivekananda called for a womens' math, whose abbess was to be Sri Sarada Devi. Swami Vivekananda initiated several women into sannyas. Through the years, womens' organizations sprang up, loosely connected to the Ramakrishna Order, but obtaining no formal recognition. In 1953, the Centenary of the birth of Sri Sarada Devi, the Sri Sarada Math was officially organized, with its own headquarters across the Ganges from Belur Math. Swami Prabhavananda was responsible for providing a large part of the funds necessary for the purchase of this property. Swami Sankarananda, President of the Order at the time of the Centenary, gave sannyas to several senior women; then the Sri Sarada Math was put on its own, to form its own hierarchy, carry out its own brahmacharya and sannyas initiations, and proceed

independently as a parallel monastic order. Today the Sri Sarada Math is functioning very well, with several branches in India and one in Australia.

I believe that the strong insistence on separation voiced by the governing body in India was due partly to its wish to prevent possible guru cults from developing in the West and partly from the feeling that a mixing of the sexes must lead to moral lapses and a consequent decline in the purity of the Order. Woman is a temptress; this may be a dated idea, but it is very prevalent in the Indian psyche. Swami Prabhavananda never saw it in this way, although he did have a case where one of his nuns and one of his monks fell in love and wanted to leave and marry. His attitude was: "Sex is sex. There are temptations everywhere. Women living exclusively with women and men with men can also induce impurity." We had cases of that also.

Swami had obtained the official consent of Headquarters in 1949 to give sannyas to women disciples. And he did so then and afterwards whenever there were suitable candidates. His position was that since he himself was a member of the Ramakrishna Order anyone taking initiation from him must be automatically also a member of that Order. A prolonged controversy ensued, which was finally concluded in 1969 when the Trustees agreed to the following formula: The Hollywood sannyasinis ('pravrajikas' is the term used in the Sri Sarada Math) are members of the Ramakrishna Order but not of Belur Math and its hierarchy. At the Vedanta Society of Northern California a similar arrangement prevails.

Swami was elated by this decision, for he now felt sure that his "girls" would be protected after his death. "Otherwise my successor might throw them out." As it transpired, the successor, Swami Swahananda, respected Swami Prabhavananda's position in encouraging the growth of the convent and in permitting several additional candidates to take sannyas in the years which followed. At the same time the separation of the sexes, long urged by Belur Math, was increasingly formalized.

With respect to the third Belur Math principle, that all sannyasins are equal, I myself felt and still feel that the heads of centers in the West, as in India, should be, ideally, of Indian origin. Indians have in their blood a feeling for the sanscritic treasurehouse, for Indian legend, for Hindu philosophy, which even the most erudite western student of such matters could hardly hope to acquire. In the West, Indian-ness grants glamour and authority. It would be undesirable for a dilution to occur which could turn western centers into little more than transcendentalist study groups or new-thought churches. But western sannyasins may well act as assistant heads in the West, branch leaders, or managers, and now in several centers do.

As we mature our interests change, and when I returned to Hollywood in 1964 I could not see myself taking up again those promotional activities I'd been so delighted to initiate and expand years before. "No," said Swami, "don't get any ideas about becoming a lecturer here." Yes, that would give me too much prestige and create jealousy. Platform work at that time was confined to those of Indian origin. A "real" swami in the West in those days was one who gave public lectures. I believe that what was on Swami's mind also was his belief that anyone appearing before the public would be seen as an example

of spirituality, and he simply felt that Indians made better examples than could any of us. The spiritual emanation of a speaker is far more important than anything he says or the brilliance of his presentation. Of course he was right. But talks had to be given in Hollywood and its branches, and how many other Prabhvanandas were available? Eventually it worked out that western sannyasins and brahmacharis, and pravrajikas and brahmacharinis, were called upon to do a good deal of public work in Hollywood and its branches, but not until after 1976 when Swami Prabhavananda died..

About transfers, Swami was less severe. It is true that up until that time there had never been any--each head of center feeling more comfortable with his own disciples and adhering to the precept of neither a lender nor a borrower be. But if I were as restless as I seemed to be I might try to find a place elsewhere. Eventually the post of aide to Swami Ritajananda at Gretz in France was negotiated, where I have worked happily as a sort of "real" Swami for the past twenty-five years. I am the first western swami to have made a move of this sort. Since then there have been several other cases, and transfers of western brahmacharis between centers have also occurred.

But again, how bewildering Swami was! After seeming to concur in my reassignment to Gretz, even facilitating it, at the very last minute Swami balked. My reservations made and my bags packed, a day or two before I was to leave for France, he actually pleaded: "Prema, stay with us for a little longer. Stay with me at least six months more." Can one imagine such a thing? Anyone else in the same situation would have been relieved to get rid of me. My stomach turned over agonizingly when I had to reply: "No, Swami, let us be sensible. You should realize that it would never work."

12.

In August, 1966, when I had been in Gretz for four months, I received a letter from Swami Prabhavananda accusing me of trying to wreck his work while in India; and so he wanted nothing more ever to do with me. Even today, when I chance to look at the file in which that letter is preserved I feel sick. I must have loved Swami more than I realized, or he possessed supernatural powers to project his anger right across America and the Atlantic. For that very afternoon I developed a high fever and had to go to bed for three days. What seems to have happened is that he was led to interpret my efforts in India to understand Belur Math orthodoxy in relation to Hollywood orthodoxy as gross disloyalty to him. Here apparently was something unimaginable, beyond excuse. Isherwood has documented Swami's utter identification with his own guru, Swami Brahmananda; Swami presumably supposed that his disciples felt the same unquestioning identification with him and his policies.

Reports reaching me from Hollywood assured me that the matter was really serious, and Swami did maintain the proscription for years. Birthday letters and Christmas cards which I sent to him evoked no response, and hints that I might like to visit Hollywood brought forth no welcome. (All this at the same time as I was having to cope with the problems of learning to live and work in France.) I understood the significance of the scriptural text describing the sadhu as soft as a flower and hard as granite. Only the famous example of Maharaj's treatment of Swami Sankarananda and the reconciliation which finally occurred between them consoled me. The effect on me was probably positive, for I redoubled my efforts

to be "right"--and as much a "real" swami at Gretz as could be, so that my master should even still take pride in me and relax his interdiction.

In 1973 I felt I must return to Southern California to see my mother for the last time, who was eighty-six and said to be dying. Swami let it be known that I could visit the Hollywood center at the same time. It was an emotional encounter. I was not inclined to play the repentent prodigal, for I felt that however he interpreted my attitudes, I had acted in good faith according to my nature and my lights. For his part, Swami greeted me in an offhand manner which but poorly--or so I hoped--masked the intense emotion he felt in having me near him again.

An amusing scene--a vintage Prabhavananda scene--was enacted when we met. He was at the luncheon table when I arrived. I was shocked to see how aged he had become. He was eighty--tiny and trembly and really old. I was sixty but had been told that I hadn't changed much since the time I'd left California seven years before. After I rose from my pranam, Swami looked at me through dimmed eyes and intoned mournfully: "Ah Prema, ah Prema, how old you have become!"

I had really nothing to say, and in the three or four times I saw him I mostly sat silent in his presence. I wanted only his blessing and to know that everything was all right between us, for this would surely be the last time that we should meet. I asked for his blessings. "Of course you have my blessings," he replied. "It is true that the man in me was mad at you, but the guru in me was never mad at you. If it had been, nothing in the three worlds could have saved you." I have puzzled over this statement many times. What does it mean? Are there then transgressions so heinous that forgiveness for them is not possible? Can divine grace be definitively withheld at the behest of the guru? It is a thought to give one pause.

Frail as he was, Swami was capable of his old machismo. This is what happened at the last interview, on 21 February, 1973. Swami was propped up in his big armchair, his feet on a footstool. I sat on a cushion beside him on the hearth. Suddenly he asked, "How is your meditation?"

"Never very satisfactory."

"It should be by now. You should be able to retain the vision of your Ideal for at least thirty uninterrupted minutes at a time."

"Oh no, Swami, I'm afraid not."

"Do you repeat your sannyas mantras every day?" This question surprised me. Sannyas is a long ceremony comprising many mantras, but it turned out that he was referring to three particularly sacred mantras which constitute the essence, as it were, of the whole.

"No, Swami."

Irritation. "No? Well, who gave you sannyas?"

"Swami Madhavananda, at Belur Math, on 7 January, 1964. You know. You were there.

"And he didn't tell you to repeat them every day?"

"No."

"All right, follow me." And Swami recited the first of the three mantras and ordered me to follow. He repeated it twice more and asked me to speak it after him each time. (Three repetitions of anything count as making it true.) The same with the second and the third essential sannyas mantras.

"And now," Swami said, leaning back in a satisfied way, "You've practically taken sannyas from me. I'm your sannyas guru."

That was all. I prostrated, pulled his feet--or at least one foot, as I was too moved to make the gesture with aplomb--against the top of my head, and left, shattered and astonished. It was outrageous; it flew in the face of all that I had learned. Normally it is the President of the Order who gives sannyas to men in India at a great ceremony--and anyway, who ever heard of giving sannyas again to someone who already had it? (But I must say, I have repeated those three mantras every day since.)

It was an act of spiritual genius, free, spontaneous, symbolic, liberating. In one blow, as outlandish as it was "illegal", my guru gave me the absolution I longed for, and the chastisement he felt I needed.

13.

Now, many years after that last interview, and many years also after Swami Prabhavananda's death, I begin to catch the meaning of that deep and puzzling phrase: the guru is God. I have had an exposition of it for forty years but am only now beginning to grasp the import. As I said, some of us come to terms with ourselves slowly.

I don't know how many other gurus like him there are or will be in our Order; Swami Prabhavananda was of the old school. And maybe the Order, proceeding lawfully, as orders must, is more comfortable without him. After all, the traditional Indian guru materializes on his own, not subject to the restrictions of any organization or relying on it for any advantages. He is an individual and his entire concern is the development of other individuals. This is the sort of person Swami was instinctively, but he bore with the Order because of its origin in Sri Ramakrishna and its fostering by Maharaj and Swami Vivekananda, and as an insurance for his spiritual descendants after his death. Mystics are upsetting to organizations, and vice versa.

The reader may then well ask: then what about those who are disciples of less talented masters, or those initiated by a President or Vice President of the Ramakrishna Mission, whose contact with their guru throughout their entire lifetime may be solely the few minutes they spend with him during the ceremony

of diksha? Is the quality of their initiation and the prospect for their growth, then, less? The answer to a question like this was given in M's first interview with Ramakrishna, as related in the Gospel: "Is God, who has made the stars and the moon, and taught mothers to care for their children, not capable of leading souls according to their needs?"

Nothing ever comes from outside. All is within, as Swami Vivekananda says in Raja Yoga, even the guru is within, God is within. The trick is to bring this innate divinity up to consciousness--the most difficult task of one's life. This is what life is for. And what the guru is for, as Swamiji says, is to disperse the obstacles so that what is innate in the organism can become manifest.

Since the principal obstacles are our ignorance and self-importance, which blind us, the guru works first and foremost to break down the ego (which we don't know we have). This is a delicate operation, for if he cuts too superficially there will be small success. If he cuts too profoundly he may, figuratively, kill the patient. In some senses, every human relation, no matter how trivial, is a guru-disciple relation. The problem with most human relationships is that because of the ignorance on both sides, not much enlightenment accrues to either participant. Wisdom in the mentor is needed (rare) and readiness in the learner (also rare). Thus the proverb: Great gurus imply great disciples.

Parallels in psychoanalytic practice are apparent.

In the case of introspective individuals it may be possible for one to be one's own guru. In his great biography of the American novelist Henry James, Professor Leon Edel shows how James wrote himself into a kind of cure. Following the middle-age crisis in his life around 1895, which invalidated his talent and threw his mind into depression, James composed a series of works whose invented characters acted out in fictional form aspects of the author's own malaise and moved to solutions which the author could accept for himself. A half-dozen such works, completed in an equal number of years, led James back to psychological well-being. A kind of enlightenment emerged, which made James the supreme artist he became, and a sage, in the remaining years of his life.

I have tried to describe some such process, based on conscientious diary keeping, in section 2 of Chapter Eight. I believe this to be a valid technique; "talking to one's journal" can provide solice, and elicit from the Inner Guide counsel unavailable from other sources.

If one can love one's guru foolishly, blindly na•vely, then everything becomes easy. One co-operates with the doctor, and the healing processes of nature ensue. Faults of his character become lovable idiosyncrasies, or little obstacles meant to exercise our fidelity; his blind spots, his errors, appear as endearing human foibles which serve to make him more accessible. Swami Prabhavananda's passionate love for Maharaj transmitted itself easily into vision and ecstasy. Isherwood's love for Prabhavananda, it is apparent, was the central stabilizing and redeeming factor in the Chris's life. I once asked Chris how to face what seemed to me to be some really unexemplary actions on the part of our guru. This is what he replied: "As nothing more than the harmless eccentricities of a genius." Or as Swami Vivekananda said in his *Inspired Talks*, "No man should be judged by his defects. The great virtues a man has are his

especially, his errors are the common weaknesses of humanity and should never be counted in estimating his character." Even rogues and scamps assuming the role of guru for ends other than altruist may produce positive results in the chela, if the chela can summon up this "blind" kind of love. Even low objects, idols and fetishes, will lead us to knowledge if we love them with the idea that they are God.

But what about stiff-necked individuals who cannot manage to scare up that kind of love, like me? Yes, I tried, and Swami tried also. Once in the early years he took me with him to the Trabuco monastery for a few days, just showering me with affection. He encouraged me to be open and free with him. Another time he invited me as his attendant on a vacation trip to the High Sierras, where he offered every grace. But it didn't work. I felt my identity was being swept away, and I held back.

And so for me there was only one effective path: scepticism, withholding of the conclusion until all the evidence was in. That can work too, as these souvenirs demonstrate. And there are instances of it in spiritual literature; but it is a longer and harder way. It is even said that one may attain God by hating him, because the act of hating causes the mind to concentrate strongly on the object, and it is a law that you cannot think of God intensely--no matter how--without attaining him. In the Gospel, Sri Ramakrishna says that realization is impossible without the annihilation of the mind: "The guru said, give me your thought and I will give you illumination."

A Hindu proverb declares that everybody gets the kind of guru he deserves. For many years I questioned this. I felt our chemistry--Swami's and mine--was all wrong; that his Bengali-ness couldn't be compatible with my pride, my reserve. His frankness embarrassed me, his habit of going into tantrums, real or assumed, turned me to ice. Not at all the sort of mentor for an organization man.

And so it turned out that I could think of almost nothing but this puzzle--the mystery of our evident incompatibility. I kept up my spiritual practices, did my japam, and wondered ruefully as the years passed what had gone wrong, why I had to be such a maverick. But as another Indian saying goes, I had been bitten by the cobra and must surely die. We must judge any therapeutic process in terms of its results. Ultimately all that Prabhavananda ever wanted from his children was that, as he frequently emphasized, they should become men and women of God. We find as we advance in it that the spiritual life isn't what we think it is at the outset. It has nothing to do with becoming better and better. It evidences itself by a transformation of the personality, by evensightedness, by inner joy, by outer loss of pride. I don't think Swami Prabhavananda cared a rap whether that transformation should occur by any particular process, although he evidently preferred the path of love. Scepticism, providing it was coupled with faithfulness to basic principles, could be considered a valid way also.

I still find "my" Swami difficult to understand. But I also see that a radical doctor was required for a difficult case. Swami was the third type of doctor Sri Ramakrishna spoke about--not the sort who simply prescribes remedies, not the type who, in addition to prescribing, coaxes the patient to take the medicine, but the third type, who puts his knee on the patient's chest and forces the medicine down his throat. If my guru had been a less forceful personality I would simply have, as so well taught by Lyle Spencer,

taken him into camp, and that would have been the end of the story for me. No therapy would have occurred.

So as I look back, I have to conclude that the guru-disciple relationship, even though in our case "swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight" (in Matthew Arnold's phrase) nevertheless did work. You can say it shouldn't have, but it did. And so, although it is difficult to represent such matters on a proper organization chart, I have to admit the truth of the adage which declares that the guru indeed is God.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Five

The Devotee as Literary Enthusiast

1.

As I told in *What Vedanta Means to Me*, the main reason I felt the unknown Vedanta must be all right, when in the 1940's I began searching for a new orientation, was that Aldous Huxley was one of its supporters. I reasoned that Vedanta couldn't be quackery or ignorant idolatry if a man as perceptive as he had become an admirer, as shown by his introduction to the Prabhavananda-Isherwood *Bhagavad-Gita* (1944), his novel *Time Must have a Stop*"(1944), and his *The Perennial Philosophy*"(1946), all shot through with Vedantic concepts. The latter book, incidentally, was written mostly in the vast library of mystical works which Gerald Heard had collected and installed at Trabuco. (More about Trabuco a little later on.) Isherwood considered *The Perennial Philosophy*" one of Aldous's greatest books. And the Hollywood screen writer, Patrick Foulk, in an appreciation of Huxley published in the May, 1980, issue of "Horizon", says of *The Perennial Philosophy* : "Certainly to those who would examine aspects of the mystical experience particularly as it affected the spiritual bourgeoning of great religious leaders over the centuries, there is no finer, more enthralling source in which to look."

When I joined the Vedanta Society of Southern California I supposed that Huxley frequently came there and that I'd meet him often. But such was not the case. He had previously appeared regularly to meditate in the shrineroom, but that time had passed. His primitive enthusiasm had cooled and he had taken up other interests. This was his way. As Alan Watts once said of him, Huxley was "always onto something". And usually something new and often obscure. But he continued to maintain a friendly attitude (he was an initiated disciple of Swami Prabhavananda) and once in a while, during my early days in Hollywood, Aldous would come for tea.

His period of contributing regularly to the Center's magazine "Vedanta and the West" had passed before I became its editor. Previously he had sent articles often--usually early drafts of material destined to be part of the book he was currently working on. (I was horrified to find that the editor who had preceded me had sent these precious texts, corrected in Huxley's own hand, directly to the typesetter and had subsequently thrown them away after having read the proofs.)

After I became editor of "Vedanta and the West" we persuaded Aldous, Gerald Heard, John van Druten, and Isherwood to let us use their names as Editorial Advisors, a device meant to attract new readers. This was continued over several years and brought prestige to our little revue. But when Aldous published *The Doors of Perception* Swami Prabhavananda was embarrassed, as it seemed to tie Vedanta to drug tak!ng. The Editorial Board was discontinued.

When *The Doors of Perception* was published Aldous sent Swami Prabhavananda an autographed copy. He added a message on the flyleaf explaining that the book contained "his" account of the mystical

experience. Swami was not amused. That interesting volume, kept in a bookcase in the reception room of the Center, later disappeared. I regretted that I had not appropriated it for safekeeping, as I had more than once thought of doing. It was a literary document of considerable interest. Through a miraculous coincidence the volume found its way into my hands in Gretz in 1991. Aldous's dedication reads as follows: "For Swami, This account of a glimpse of reality from an unusual angle, in friendship and admiration, Aldous Huxley, 1954."

I did have the joy of putting one or two of Aldous's essays, given to "Vedanta and the West", through the press. It was a pleasure to see at close range how he handled ideas and expressed them. Like others, I was less enthusiastic about Aldous's novels, since they appeared to serve hardly more than creaky vehicles designed to carry Aldous's humanistic messages. In 1950 or so *Time Must Have a Stop* impressed me hardly at all. In 1987 I read it again. "Good heavens," is my current evaluation, "what a work of genius!" It may not be a perfect work of fiction, but what a literary tour-de-force! The culture it displays, the wit, the elegant use of words, the depiction of the subtle stratagems of maya!

The Huxley teaparties could be interesting if someone of Aldous's milieu were on hand to inspire him to talk, or if his first wife Maria were present, who knew how to bring him out. When it was only Swami Prabhavananda and some of us from the house--although Aldous was supremely kind and well-mannered--things sometimes became awkward. I remember one such effort to get the great man to talk. One of our members was named Pagli, which is a Bengali nickname meaning amiable madcap. Claspng her hands like a society hostess, and turning to him with benevolence, Pagli intoned: "Do tell me, Mr. Huxley, who is your favorite author?"

For a moment Aldous looked perplexed. Then he replied in his soft, well-modulated tones, "Well, I suppose you could say it is Shakespeare."

One of these teaparties was a grand affair which included Alan Watts. Isherwood and the famous English man of letters Stephen Spender also were present. This was in the summer of 1951. Watts was just then gaining prominence as spokesman for Zen. I had extracted an article from him for our anthology just then about to be published, called *Vedanta for Modern Man*. Swami had not been enthusiastic about the inclusion of Watts, but I had insisted. Watt's philosophy of realization without asceticism struck Swami as a mischievous use of a high principle to condone self-indulgence--like the rationalization offered by the sadhu mentioned in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna who explained that he was committing no offense in indulging in sexual promiscuity since all is Brahman.

Swami showed his disapproval of easy Zen at this teaparty by engaging Watts in a conversation meant to lay bare the error of Watts's doctrine. The scene is related in Watts's *In My own Way*, published by Pantheon in 1972. Watts has described accurately, although a bit nastily, what happened--up to a point. Swami had manoeuvred Watts into declaring that the Atman, supposing one were in samadhi and identified with the Atman (Watts reports the word inaccurately as Brahman), would feel it if the individual were at that moment pinched.

"Atman would feel the pinch!" exclaimed Swami in disgust, demonstrating to all those present that Watts was only talking about religion and had no experience of it.

Swami hated the theory that one could just jump into realization, and often quoted a conversation that he had had with the great Japanese authority, Dr. D. T. Suzuki, in which the latter had said, "But of course asceticism is a part of Zen." Suzuki also said, because of such misunderstandings, "Sometimes I wish I could burn all my books."

That Aldous Huxley was an eager, persistent seeker of enlightenment, and may eventually have achieved something of the sort, is documented in a recent book called *Huxley in Hollywood* by David King Dunaway, Harper & Row, 1989. Seeing metaphysically was as important to Aldous as was overcoming the handicap of his nearly blind physical state, and he applied himself to many techniques to induce light with touching conscientiousness.

2.

In the first years at Hollywood I had a good deal to do with Gerald Heard. It is beneficial to set down what I remember of him. He played a useful part in the development of Ramakrishna's work in Southern California.

I met Gerald for the first time at the ceremony on September 7, 1949, when he turned over Trabuco College to the Vedanta Society of Southern California and it became the Ramakrishna Monastery. I had not joined as yet, but this gift made joining possible, as the acquisition of Trabuco provided space for additional novices.

Abandoning Trabuco College must have been as much of a relief to Gerald as obtaining it was a triumph for Swami Prabhavananda. Gerald was the first of the English expatriots to have come to Prabhavananda a dozen or so years before, and his enthusiasm had induced Aldous and Isherwood to follow. Gerald was the first of the three to take initiation from Swami Prabhavananda.

But there was a certain adolescent streak in Gerald: he fell out of love as abruptly as he fell in. Traits in Prabhavananda went against the grain: mainly he found Swami not austere enough. Gerald exposed his loss of faith in a memo posing three questions about how a holy man should live. They dealt with austerity in holy men and non-association with women. Prabhavananda responded to these questions, explaining his position, and published the responses in "Vedanta and the West". Gerald broke with Prabhavananda and decided to create an ideal community of his own, a college of prayer, as he called it, in Trabuco Canyon, halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego.

The new institution, handsomely conceived in the style of an Italian monastery, was opened just as the USA was becoming involved in World War II. Male students were few, so that to make the institution work, women had to be admitted. To cap the climax Gerald's leading "monk" and "nun" ran off to get married. Gerald found he was visited with some of the same problems he had criticized Prabhavananda

for having handled inadequately.

Faithful Chris was present at the dedication. He spoke, as did Gerald and Prabhavananda. I don't remember what anyone said, but I remember that the occasion reeked of irony. And it was so hot that day in the refectory-auditorium that the candles before the newly-installed photo of Ramakrishna bent, and one bent so much that it fell out of its socket while someone was speaking.

There was after that a period of rapprochement. The Society now consisted of the headquarters in Hollywood, plus the monastery at Trabuco, and the convent at Santa Barbara. Swami felt he had to apportion his time between the three, so he sought a speaker for some Sunday lectures in Hollywood. Since Gerald was renowned as an orator and had not been greatly enriched from sales of his books, he was engaged to speak once or twice a month at fifty dollars a lecture.

This is when my close contact, as well as great difficulty, with Gerald began. What Gerald was interested in was traditional Christianity modernized through concepts drawn from the sciences, and the whole made operational by the blending in of techniques borrowed from yoga psychology. Exposition of this interesting system by one who was a fascinating speaker drew enormous audiences. I remember that on one occasion Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, and Gladys Cooper were in the audience. As I was by then church secretary I had to cope with these onslaughts. This was not at all easy, for on the whole these were Gerald's admirers, who came solely for him. They had little interest in us or our temple. Our facilities were far too small. Parking was a disaster. The temple was filled (or people had reserved their places and gone out for a chat) long before the hour of the lecture. We set up loudspeakers in other buildings and even on the lawn. The worst problem was that certain eminent personalities--Iris Tree, daughter of Sri Beerbohm Tree, was one of them--demanded certain privileges such as having good seats reserved for last-minute entrances, which provoked anger in others who had come early only to find the best seats already spoken for; or being paged on the telephone.

Gerald, shabily dressed, would come in, stand tall in the pulpit, look off into the distance with his already partially blind eyes, and begin. Out of his mouth poured a flow of eloquence, laced with references to obscure but highly significant scientific findings and fascinating hypotheses, the whole decorated with quotations from scripture, poetry, and sayings of world mystics. The audience listened with bated-breath attention, some even uttering muted sighs of appreciation.

As editor of "Vedanta and the West" I had to turn recordings of these orations into publishable articles. Put down in black and white, the material had a tendency to collapse like a cooling soufflŽ. The quotations were often inaccurate, and references could not always be verified.

In my terrible intolerance of that period I found the whole thing ridiculous; that wasn't what I'd left the social sciences for--and the social world--to be mixed up in a carnival like this! And it is true that practically none of Gerald's followers ever became Vedanta devotees. Of course my poor opinion of his effort was brought to Gerald's attention and in due course he gave up speaking in our temple.

A new period of coolness set in. None of us had much contact with Gerald for years. But after taking sannyas, before leaving Southern California to take up my post at Gretz, I went to visit Gerald and his secretary, Michael Barrie. I wanted to reestablish good relations. Unfortunately the interview passed off in an unsatisfactory way.

But Gerald maintained a respectful although impersonal relationship with Swami Prabhavananda. In 1966 he had a stroke which paralyzed his arm. This stroke was followed by others. Eventually he became completely paralyzed and could hardly speak. He bore with this disaster with resignation, and died in 1971. He worked out his salvation according to his own fashion, as we all must. He may not have been a Ramakrishna-ite, but that doesn't matter. He exemplified what Ramakrishna came to teach, that the passionate search for God should be man's overwhelming preoccupation. In Gerald's case, it cannot be doubted that this was the situation.

3.

In the 1940's I read Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*.. The scenes of Larry's researches in India and his enlightenment inspired me at that period to test that sharp cutting instrument myself. Maugham's relations with Swami Prabhavananda had occurred before I reached Hollywood, but I heard so many accounts of these matters that I always felt I had been a participant.

In 1951 a series of articles was inaugurated in "Vedanta and the West" entitled "What Vedanta Means to Me". Eventually some thirty contributions to this series were published. All the personal histories were composed by westerners--Americans and Europeans. Looking back through this mass of personal testimony, I was surprised to find how many of the writers had volunteered the information that their interest in Vedanta had been first aroused through reading *The Razor's Edge* The office workers at the Hollywood center noticed a similar phenomenon. Many people who sent for information, or who came to pay a first inquiring visit, said that they had written or come as a result of having read the Maugham novel.

In his *Somerset Maugham: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Indiana University Press, 1961), Richard A. Cordell estimates that *The Razor's Edge* had sold at least five million copies up to 1961. Cordell says, further:

"*The Razor's Edge*" was probably the first novel with literary value, the first "good" novel that many of these servicemen ever read--to judge by the ingenuous and touching letters they wrote. More than fifteen years after its publication Maugham still receives letters with comments on the novel and inquiries about the free-wheeling hero, who finds himself discontented with the very kind of life most of these servicemen were inevitably to lead. They were disturbed to find their concepts of the good life challenged. *The Razor's Edge*.....answers few or no questions, but leads the reader to ask himself questions about good and evil, justice and injustice, fact and superstition, the good life and the wasted life. Maugham still receives an occasional request for Larry's picture, and a few correspondants

have asked for his autograph.

To have attracted such a large and dedicated audience, *The Razor's Edge* must display qualities besides mere literary excellence, must have more to recommend it than simply good escapist storytelling. What is the reason for the phenomenal appeal of this book? Why should it have been read so widely and have exerted such influence? How is it that the words of its title, taken from a passage in the *Katha Upanishad*, should now in the West everywhere evoke the idea of religious struggle? How is it that the name of its hero should have almost become a household word, denoting a spiritual seeker, and moreover a seeker following Indian methods? What kind of spiritual ideas does this book communicate? How truly are these ideas set forth? Why has this story of the American Laurence Darrell and his search for God stirred up religious impulses in so many people?

When the Nazis overran France in 1940 Somerset Maugham left his home on the Riviera. (He was evacuated to England from Cannes in a coal barge, along with five hundred other British citizens, many of them celebrated Riviera hostesses, permitted to take hardly any other possessions with them other than their jewel boxes. The trip took twenty days, during which Maugham reported the passengers were never even able to take their clothes off. (I have heard that that rich old lady, Lady Bateman--about whom Swami Prabhavananda used to tell that funny story about being too busy to meditate--was on that rude voyage.) From England Maugham flew to the United States, where he remained until 1946. He wrote *The Razor's Edge* during his American residence, at a house in South Carolina lent by his American publisher. The book was published in early 1944 when Maugham was just seventy.

In the mid 1940's a rumor became widespread which served to focus attention upon the possible pertinence of Indian mysticism to Westerners. It was known that Christopher Isherwood was living or had lived in a Hindu ashrama in Hollywood as the disciple of an Indian swami; and Maugham, who was a friend of Isherwood's, had just published a novel about a westerner who had become a Vedanta adept. Surely, then, Isherwood must be the prototype of Larry? It is strange that such an idea could take hold, since it is difficult to imagine two individuals more dissimilar than Maugham's Illinois-born hero and the British writer. However the rumor persisted, and it was circulated by "Time" magazine. This called forth an interesting response from Isherwood, printed in "Time's" December 17, 1945, issue: "...I am not, as you have twice stated in your columns, the original, or part-original, of Larry in Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. I can stand a good deal of kidding from my friends, but this rumor has poisoned my life for the past six months, and I wish it would die as quickly as possible."

Late in 1946 the motion picture version of *The Razor's Edge* was issued. It may not have been a very good picture, and it may not have been very true to the book. But there can be no doubt that this film brought Larry and his search for God to the attention of individuals who had never read or even heard of the Maugham's book.

Looking back to the state of knowledge prevailing in the mid-1940's, one is amazed to contemplate the vast changes which have occurred in such a short time. Sri Ramakrishna was not generally known in the West then. Think of the difference today! Sri Ramakrishna's words have found their way into

anthologies of teachings of world religious teachers; he has even been quoted in "The Reader's Digest". Popular dictionaries and encyclopedias give biographical data. The idea that all religions are true and in their essentials are in agreement was a startling idea fifty years ago. Now the notion is discussed freely on campuses and in churches. The declaration adopted by the Vatican Council II on the relation of the Catholic church to non-Christian religions would have been unthinkable a few years before. The sons of the church are exhorted to "recognize, preserve, and promote those spiritual and moral goods" found among non-Christians. Catholics must treat all men in a brotherly way: "The Church thus reproveth...any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their...religion". In its declaration on religious liberty the Council declared that men have the right to think and worship as they wish, without outside coercion.

4.

Swami Prabhavananda and Somerset Maugham met four times during Maugham's 1940-1946 sojourn in the United States.

The first meeting took place before *The Razor's Edge* came out. Swami Prabhavananda could not remember exactly when it was, but the year may have been 1941. Maugham was in California in 1941. Maugham had been to India several years before and had had some contact there with the Ramakrishna Mission. He had visited the famous Indian holy man, Sri Ramana Maharshi. Maugham and Swami discussed India. Prabhavananda was not much drawn to Maugham on that first meeting. Maugham's permission to leave England and take sanctuary in the United States carried with it an obligation to produce favorable propaganda for the British, then deeply involved in their war effort. To Swami, Maugham seemed very like the usual British imperialist. He expressed the official attitude of the time, of opposition to independence for India. The other three meetings took place in the summer of 1945, when Maugham was in Southern California writing the screen play for *The Razor's Edge*. During the three months required to complete this assignment, Maugham lived at the home of film director George Cukor.

The first of the 1945 meetings took place on June 18 at the Player's Restaurant on the Sunset Strip, to which the author invited Prabhavananda for dinner. Chicken curry was on the menu, and the two decided to try this Indian dish. But Prabhavananda found the curry far from what it should be--a poor Western approximation. He proposed to Maugham that when they came together the next time Maugham should have dinner at the Center, where he would be given chicken curry that was the real thing. The second meeting, consequently, occurred on Ivar Avenue. The two met for the third time during that summer of 1945 at the home of George Cukor. Swami recalled that Katherine Hepburn and Ethel Barrymore were present, along with Maugham, Cukor, and Isherwood.

Maugham's purpose in seeking these meetings with Swami was to obtain technical assistance. Prabhavananda's advice was required on matters having to do with the Indian mystical sequences of the motion picture. Maugham had been paid a large sum for the screen rights, but he agreed to write the screenplay for nothing. He found this a pleasant and not very taxing job. Prabhavananda offered two or

three suggestions for additional scenes not in the book, to add authenticity and atmosphere. "Ah, Swami," murmured Maugham, "you are going to make me work hard."

Cukor tested an almost unknown young actor for the part of Larry. But the test was not satisfactory. Meanwhile the famous actor Tyrone Power was demobilized after more than three years in the Marine Corps, and it was decided that he should play Larry.

In the film Clifton Webb was cast as the worldly Elliott Templeton. Webb and Power came to the Ivar Avenue house so that Power could discuss with Prabhavananda the characterization of Larry. Swami naturally found it difficult to visualize Tyrone Power being able to portray a realized soul. Standing with his back to the fireplace, talking to Swami, Power commenced to discuss his conception of how he planned to convey Maugham's hero. Prabhavananda responded in unconcealed disbelief: "And you think that you can play Larry!" Power sat down with a thump at this candid questioning of his ability to depict a man of illumination. But the two talked the matter over, and as a result Power studied the role and its religious implications with care, in an attempt to give as authentic a portrayal as he was capable of giving.

On more than one of their meetings Maugham discussed Vedanta with Swami Prabhavananda. He told Swami that he really accepted advaita Vedanta; but he felt he was too old to himself commence the practice of religion. That Maugham understood and admired Hindu metaphysics is apparent from his intelligent treatment of the subject in Chapter Six of *The Razor's Edge*. With characteristic diffidence Maugham announces: "I feel it right to warn the reader that he can very well skip this chapter without losing the thread of such story as I have to tell, since for the most part it is nothing more than the account of a conversation that I had with Larry. I should add, however, that except for this conversation I should perhaps not have thought it worth-while to write this book." And the reader will perhaps agree that without that most important section depicting Larry's spiritual struggle and his ultimate realization of union with the Divine, he might not find it worth the while to read the book.

Ten years or so after *The Razor's Edge* came out Maugham wrote an essay on Ramana Maharshi called "The Saint". Maugham says he heard about the south Indian holy man when he was at Madras and decided to visit him. After a hot, bumpy ride of several hours, Maugham and party reached the Maharshi's ashrama at Tiruvannamalai. He was told that the Maharshi would see him in a little while. Suddenly Maugham fainted dead away. He was carried to a hut and placed on a bed. The Maharshi was told what had happened. Since Maugham was not well enough to go to the hall where the Maharshi generally sat, the Maharshi, accompanied by several disciples, came to see Maugham in the hut.

Maugham describes how the Maharshi greeted him with a few pleasant words, then sat quietly beside him and meditated for a quarter of an hour. After that he asked Maugham if he had any questions. But Maugham, feeling not at all well, said he had none. The Maharshi replied that silence also was conversation. Without further talk he sat with the writer for another fifteen minutes, then left.

Later when Maugham felt better he went to the hall where the Maharshi sat most of the time, receiving

visitors, and answering their questions. Maugham watched with fascination the way the Maharshi responded to his callers, and the comings and goings of the devotees, marking the extreme veneration paid the holy man. Eventually the Maharshi went into meditation again; and Maugham tiptoed out of the building.

Maugham reported with considerable humor how he heard later that his fainting had given rise to fantastic rumors. The news of it was carried throughout India. His becoming unconscious was ascribed to the awe which was supposed to have overcome him at the prospect of going into the presence of the holy man. Even before seeing the Maharshi, the Maharshi's influence had caused Maugham to go into samadhi! The plain fact, Maugham informs us, is that he was subject to fainting spells all his life, due to a long-standing physical malfunction. "Since then, however, Indians come to see me now and then as the man who by the special grace of the Maharshi was rapt into the Infinite, as his neighbors went to see Herman Melville as the man who had lived among cannibals."

In "The Razor's Edge" the Maharshi is called Sri Ganesha. The ashrama where Larry stays resembles the Maharshi's ashrama, as described in "The Saint", except that it has been moved from the central part of southern India to the Kerala coast.

5.

During the time when he lived at Ivar Avenue, Isherwood wrote an article called "The Problem of the Religious Novel". In this essay he analyzed the difficulties to be overcome in creating a really adequate work of this sort. While he believed that writing about a saint would be a most interesting literary endeavor, Isherwood confessed that the problems to be dealt with would be so enormous he hardly believed it could be done well.

Isherwood explained that the writer would have, first, to show the saint as basically no different from anybody else; he just becomes different as a result of following objectives different from those followed by most other people.

How to make the character's "conversion"--his change of direction--credible would be a second problem. To properly describe the method--perhaps a long struggle--by which the aspirant becomes a saint would be a third difficulty to be surmounted.

Finally, said Isherwood, "We come to the last phase of the story, the portrait of the perfected saint. Here I am sure I should give up in despair. Nothing short of genius could succeed in such a task. For the mystical experience can never be described. It can only be written around, hinted at, dimly reflected in word and deed."

Isherwood concluded with the suggestion that perhaps a really adequate religious novel could only be written by a saint, but "saints, unfortunately, are not in the habit of writing religious novels."

As examples, Isherwood mentioned and evaluated a half-dozen works of fiction giving portraits of persons of spiritual attainment. He repeatedly pointed out *The Brothers Karamazov* as an example which succeeded, especially in the sections concerning Father Zozimov. (I recently reread *The Shoes of the Fisherman* by Morris West and would class this book as another successful example.) Isherwood gave Maugham in *The Razor's Edge* fairly high marks for succeeding as well as almost anyone could in solving each of the four problems confronting the writer of the religious novel.

The hero of *The Razor's Edge* meets Isherwood's first criterion very well--that the saint-to-be should be portrayed as an ordinary man who, religiously speaking, makes good. Isherwood said in his essay: "Somerset Maugham...does this quite successfully... Larry, when we first meet him, is an entirely reassuring character, lively, natural, normal, a typical American boy. I think Maugham's choice of such a character had a great deal to do with the immense popularity of the book."

To make Larry not only an American but an American from the Chicago area strengthens the book in another way. As one reviewer said, Chicago was chosen as the starting point of the story because it was the Englishman's conception of the "apotheosis of American crassness". Larry knew influential people and could have had their sponsorship had he wanted to enter the world of business. He could have fulfilled the American dream. But Larry rebelled against the promptings of his materialistic environment. With this rebellion the reader identifies, for has not he, the reader, often felt the same misgivings?

Second, Larry's conversion, or change of direction. According to Isherwood, "Maugham is rather vague on this point; he merely suggests that Larry's change of heart is caused by his experiences in the first World War." (He saw a friend of his, a flyer like himself, maimed and killed in a crash, and an overwhelming anxiety about the problem of evil took possession of him.)

It is possible to disagree with Isherwood when he says that Maugham was vague, and to argue that actually Maugham handled the matter of Larry's change of direction in a psychologically sound manner. There was no conversion. In fact, as I have said before, it is open to question whether the instantaneous and lasting change of character implied by the word conversion ever occurs. We can presume that Maugham means for the reader to see that Larry was born with discrimination, gained slowly and as a result of suffering in previous lives. Because he had gained them all before and understood their inability to satisfy, Larry rejected in advance the advertised objectives of ordinary life.

Of course Larry does not know what he wants at the outset. How could he know, considering the absence of any tradition of mysticism in his Protestant upbringing? But he senses he wants something greater than his natural environment affords him. Thus Larry's conversion is, as it must be for most people, a progressive fumbling, a matter of feeling his way along in accordance with some inner urging, until he finally finds a teacher and a way.

The third problem is to depict the struggle of the saint-to-be, leading up to his perfection. Isherwood says that he would stress this phase. "The greater part of my novel would deal...with X's struggles

toward sainthood... I think that most writers have erred in making this phase of their story too somber and depressing... Surely the mishaps and setbacks which beset the path of spiritual progress can be recounted with some of the humor which invests one's failures in cookery or falls in learning to ski? Maugham, I believe, would agree with me here. There is nothing gloomy about Larry's career. Unfortunately, however, his creator has gone to the other extreme, and one gets the impression that becoming a saint is just no trouble at all."

This is, one must admit, a fault in the book. Yes, Larry's search takes a fairly long time--more than a dozen years altogether. But not much of it could be called intense spiritual practice. He wanders through country after country. He has all kinds of experiences and meets all sorts of people. He studies languages, science, art, and philosophy. He reads a good deal of mystical literature. He spends some time in a Benedictine monastery.

But the period of Larry's actual sadhana is very short and apparently devoid of pain. He arrives at Sri Ganesha's ashrama and takes instruction from the Maharshi, settles down to serious and systematic meditation, and achieves illumination. All this requires but about two years. What a speed record! Regarding this, Larry himself says: "I dared not think that this was illumination that I, Larry Darrell of Marvin, Illinois, had received when others striving for it for years, with austerity and mortification, still waited."

Yes, Larry was a spectacular exception. As a fictional character he perhaps had to be an exception, for dramatic purposes. To have shown Larry struggling year after year for a lifetime would have made boring reading and would have completely upset the structure of the book. As it is, Larry is still young--in his thirties--when he is a finished saint, and his life is ahead of him. He is, in fact, not only a finished saint; he is a glamorous saint.

Fourth, as to the portrait of the finished saint. Isherwood stresses how difficult it is to describe a Knower of God: "Maugham is greatly to be admired for his...ambitious attempt--even if...he is not altogether successful."

How has Maugham depicted Larry on his return from India? He describes him as unusually young looking for his age. There is a great sweetness in his smile. He strikes one as modest and sincere. He possesses "goodness". He manifests much composure. There is about him something like an "inner listening". Maugham has Larry give up sex and alcohol and his income. He has his hero express self-abandonment to Divine Providence by declaring he will probably go back to the United States and earn his living working as a mechanic or by driving a taxicab (presumably the American equivalent of living in the East by the mendicant's staff and begging bowl).

But all these are only surface indications. They really mean nothing, or next to nothing. The affair is not so easy. For the essential fact about a saint is not observable. It is hidden inside him. Many Indian scriptures take up the matter. All agree that there is no tangible external criterion of inner Knowledge. For example, in Sri Shankara's *The Crest Jewel of Discrimination* it is stated that the knower of the

Atman "bears no outward mark of a holy man". Further, "Sometimes he appears to be a fool, sometimes a wise man. Sometimes he seems splendid as a king, sometimes feeble-minded. Sometimes he is calm and silent. Sometimes he draws men to him. Sometimes people honor him greatly, sometimes they insult him. Sometimes they ignore him." Sri Shankara goes on: "The ignorant see the body of a knower of Brahman and identify him with it. Actually he is free from the body and every other kind of bondage. To him the body is merely a shadow."

Thus it is not a sound procedure to try to give a portrait of a man of God by providing descriptions of his appearance, his actions, his words. So-called saintly qualities can be assumed by anyone with a little acting talent. If, then, everything important about a saint is subjective, how is an author to describe him? It probably cannot be done, as Isherwood has said, or at least not directly. The writer must instead produce a picture of the saint in a roundabout way, "with the utmost persuasiveness, deftness, and cunning. It can only be written around, hinted at."

Swami Vivekananda said that if a person should think one really great thought, even if he were in a cave, that thought would infiltrate the world and benefit all humanity. What Swamiji meant is that the significant attribute of the knower of God--as far as the outside is concerned--is that he exerts (whether visibly or not) an elevating effect upon other people. Having become magnetized, he magnetizes others. Having had "good vibrations" broadcast to him, he automatically broadcasts "good vibrations" to others. The social utility of mysticism consists in the saint's capacity to balance the world's negative proclivities with his positive proclivities.

If this is true, then it follows that the only way we can hope to describe a saint is by depicting his effect for good upon others. Not by looking directly at him, but by calculating his influence can we obtain a sense of his quality. As seekers, as the ignorant, we cannot know how the perfected man feels, but we can gain an indication by watching how he makes other people feel. We can get his measure in terms of his effect upon those his life--his "really great thought"--touches.

Maugham understood this very well. For he had Larry say, at the end of the all-important Chapter Six: "If you throw a stone in a pond the universe isn't quite the same as it was before. It's a mistake to think that these holy men in India lead useless lives. They are a shining light in the darkness. They represent an ideal that is a refreshment to their fellows; the common run may never attain it, but they respect it and it affects their lives for good. When a man becomes pure and perfect the influence of his character spreads so that they who seek truth are naturally drawn to him."

However, if the only way an author can portray a saint is by picturing his effect upon others, we have to admit that Maugham has failed to solve this aspect of the problems of the religious novel. For Larry, after his return from India, is not shown as having any beneficial effect upon others at all.

Larry's youthful sweetheart, Isabel, remains impatient with Larry, still in love with him although married to Gray, right up to the end of the book. Nothing about Larry impresses her, confounds her set opinions, or makes her give thought to the deeper concerns of life. Despite years of knowing Larry, Isabel remains

what she has always been, a self-centered society woman.

In the story of Sophie Macdonald we see what is perhaps an attempt on Maugham's part to display Larry's saintly qualities through his effect upon another individual. Beneath Sophie's promiscuity, drunkenness, and dope addition Larry finds an essential purity. He offers to marry her. But the necessity of her having to change her way of life only antagonizes Sophie. She reforms briefly, then becomes worse than before, until she is found in the waters of the Toulon harbor, murdered.

It may be claimed that Larry helps Gray; for he removes his headaches and restores his confidence in himself. But this he does through a psychic trick, which Larry himself disclaims, as having no spiritual significance.

We have to admit that the "Book Review Digest" for 1944 summarized Larry truly when it said of him that he "finds a certain measure of personal peace, but succeeds in making life even more difficult for those who have tried to make him lead a conventional life."

Are we to conclude hence that *The Razor's Edge* is a failure, or at best only a partial success as a religious novel? Shall we say that Somerset Maugham's book, despite its phenomenal popularity and its known effect for good upon many, does not measure up to Isherwood's criteria?

Surely not. I believe that Maugham has succeeded wonderfully well, but in a wholly unexpected manner. He may not have been successful in depicting Larry's sainthood through showing us Larry's effect upon the other characters in the book. But he has accomplished his end well, in a different way. Larry's sainthood is visible through the effect of his life and achievement upon the thousands and millions of readers who have been inspired by it. We see that Larry was a Knower of God because he makes us, as readers, want to remold our lives, makes us feel that we can remold our lives, as he did.

Larry is not just a character in a book. He seems to live independently, as a live person. Whatever Maugham's failures may have been, of omission or commission, he has not presented us with a creature of fantasy. People have attained God. People do attain God. Larry appeals to us because he is self-certifying. We see intuitively that he is real. We feel like the servicemen did, when they wrote to Maugham requesting photographs of Larry, or Larry's autograph. We know perfectly well--because of what the account of his accomplishment inspires in us--that Larry Darrell is true.

6.

I knew him as a friend for more than thirty-five years, read all his books, kept up with most of the critical material that appeared appraising his writing, worked with him on *Ramakrishna and his Disciples*, *A Meeting by the River*, and other literary productions, am his brother in religion in that we both are disciples of Swami Prabhavananda. And yet, undertaking to set down my souvenirs of Christopher Isherwood thrusts me into a mood of uncertainty.

Chris died on January 4, 1986, at the age of eighty-one. I miss him more than I can say.

From the first moment we met, I reacted agreeably to Chris's charm. He gave me the immediate sensation that he liked me. He had the ability to make everyone he came in contact with feel easy in his presence, that you held a privileged position in his estimation, that he found you interesting as a person. I believe he did sincerely find almost everyone interesting, and not merely as material for future books. Chris was intensely curious as to how human nature manifested itself in its multifarious fashions. I eventually came to see this as a sort of spiritual quality. Sri Ramakrishna said that the greatest manifestation of God is in man. Contemplating man, in all his diversity, with wonder and affection, is thus akin to divine worship. Chris surely worshipped at this shrine.

But then again, when I first knew him I sometimes wondered if Chris were not as much a performer as a writer. He had learned how to gain and maintain a place as a literary celebrity. He was audacious and something of an exhibitionist. He himself spoke of himself as an actor. He had figured out human beings well enough to know that, although they might protest, they rather liked being shocked. He held the public's attention for some sixty years and holds it still--perhaps more than ever--and not so much for what he wrote as for the image of himself he conveyed. How much of this was a useful pose and how much a genuine personality trait I never knew--and I don't think he knew either.

On the other hand, that audaciousness permitted Chris to be a courageous defender of truth as he saw it, who often used the celebrity he enjoyed to promote the rights of the then discriminated against minority, the homosexual. He was candid about himself as belonging to that minority and fiercely championed equal rights for its members.

Whatever else he was, there was in Chris the devoted disciple, who maintained an intense loyalty to his guru, and a readiness, during the guru's life and after his death, to further his guru's objectives. Through books, articles, and speeches Chris did much to inform the public about Vedanta.

At times I felt envious of Chris, and resented his superstar appearances at the Center. I thought of myself as dogging my life away there seven days a week with not much recompense and very little appreciation; then Chris would make his weekly appearance of an hour or so and all would turn gala. Prabhavananda would become joyous and there would be an atmosphere of f•te. In these moments I resented him as someone who would eat his cake and have it too, for he seemed to manage to be sincerely devotional and happily worldly at the same time. This stance puzzled me and confused some of his other admirers.

Then there was the revealer and the self-revealer, who in telling so much about himself, made us understand much about ourselves. In revealing so openly his weaknesses, his moods, the troubles he had with his ego and his sensual nature, his occasional feelings of slothfulness and discouragement, we were permitted to see deep into another human being. We, all of us, had those same feelings too, but wouldn't face them. It was refreshing to find someone who did. Chris's candor drew us close to him, and taught us to deal gently with the same tendencies in ourselves.

It was as though the writer and the writing were one inseparable entity--with the writer perhaps more interesting than the writing. It has been noted by Chris's critics that practically all the characters he created were facets of his own personality; and in some of his books he wrote about himself by name, in the third person, as one of the characters.

As I struggle here to describe Chris as I knew him, I feel less and less sure of what to say. I despair of being able to write a just appraisal of Chris. He was a very big person. Swami Prabhavananda said of him that he was the most intelligent of all his disciples. The subject is rather too big and my powers are rather too small. "Tis so much to be a king," said Montaigne, "that he is so only by being so. The strange luster that surrounds him conceals and shrouds him from us; our sight is there broken and dissipated, being stopped and filled by the prevailing light."

But let me try.

7.

Knowing Chris made my life far more interesting than it would have been if I had not known him. The subject of eminence is a fascinating one. How to account for special talent, for greatness? Take as illustration the case of film personalities. What essential ingredient made Greta Garbo a world figure, whereas any number of other strikingly beautiful women gained no prominence at all--and makes Garbo, whose presence has been lost to us for fifty or more years, a deathless icon still? Those who knew Garbo said that she was rather dull personally. Or public personalities such as John Kennedy. Now that the hypnotic effect of his physical presence has faded, we see that his qualities were not outstanding. And yet he remains a luminary. Curious, that. We use the word "talent". Yes, but that's no answer. Concentration, application, hard work. Perhaps, but they explain little; some celebrities are quite devoid of enterprise. We use, of course, the catchword genius, but that doesn't explain anything. It is just a way of describing the result and pigeonholing the question.

Sri Ramakrishna said, "The lead cow is the one which wears the biggest bell." He didn't say, "They give the biggest bell to the leader of the troupe." Nor did he say: "The cow on which they hang the biggest bell becomes the leader." He said: "The lead cow is the one which wears the biggest bell." What this means is that eminence itself, as Montague remarked, makes for eminence. It is self-certifying.

Vedanta philosophy pictures Brahman as immutable, associated with an active principle called power or Shakti. Shakti manifests itself to a greater or lesser extent in all life. But some individuals are granted a rather larger portion, and when power is present it makes those individuals exceptional. "Know," said Ramakrishna, in another affirmation of the same principle, "that wherever is found the manifestation of any exceptional power, a portion of Shakti is there." Or as Sri Krishna says in the Tenth Chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita: "Whatever in this world is powerful, beautiful, or glorious, that you may know to have come forth from a fraction of my power and glory."

Consider beauty, charm, charisma. Shakti manifesting itself as beauty sweeps all before it, to inspire the

composition of poems, romances, and dramas in their millions, some of the most profound reflections of philosophers, and any number of imprudent or desperate actions on the part of those at whom it has shot its arrows. *La Dame aux Camélias* is the moral tale of a man so captured by the power of beauty as to commit every folly, regaining sanity only when he has had the body of his beloved disinterred, to contemplate the skeleton beneath the putrefying flesh.

Mere youth, too, confers upon its possessor unusual power, which those who have lost it evaluate ever so much more highly than those who possess it. I remember an aging professor at the University of Southern California who had the habit of remarking, as he looked across the campus at the beautiful boys and girls: "There they go. They have it but don't know what to do with it; I know what to do with it but I don't have it."

Shakti can manifest itself in ugliness and deviant action also. (Thus the great symbolism of the goddess Kali. If one would understand the working of the divine scheme of things, one should study Kali.) The successful confidence man may be seen as the counterpart, equally valid, of a Nobel Prize winner in science, Adolf Hitler of St. Francis, debilitating cancer cells of those cells producing bounding health. Swami Vivekananda wrote to Mary Hale on 28 March, 1900: " You silly girl, I was Jesus and I was Judas Iscariot. Both my play, my fun."

Let me cite a neat case history of the naked working of Shakti which I myself witnessed. Chris had arranged a teaparty for Paulette Goddard and Erich Maria Remarque, to which he invited Swami Prabhavananda, Swami Satprakashananda, Swami Krishnananda, and me. Swami Satprakashananda, the doyen of the Indian swamis in America, was very austere and had little idea, I suspect, as to who the chief guests were. Swami Prabhavananda was interested, as he found celebrities stimulating. I, of course, was beside myself with excitement. Imagine having tea with the author of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which had so moved me as a young man of twenty or so; and the star of such movie classics as *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator* !

Of course Chris knew what he was doing, and he watched the working out of the chemistry of the encounters with hardly disguised satisfaction. Remarque said little; he sat in his place looking apoplectic, fending off remarks Paulette Goddard flung at him about his flushed face and consumption of brandy. It was she who shone. Then over fifty, never really beautiful (an earlier husband, Charles Chaplin, spoke of her as a "gamine" type), saying nothing memorable, Paulette Goddard had us all hugely pleased in no time. Swami Prabhavananda always found women sympathetic, so it is not surprising that he responded to the film personality with charm and urbanity. He was his most charismatic. It was the response of the ascetic, usually silent older swami which was so amazing. Swami Satprakashananda became gallant, witty, gay beyond anyone's imagination. A girl of no special background or education, born Marion Levy, emerging from the tenements of Brooklyn to find a place at sixteen as a dancer in a chorus line, going on to become a star, and the wife of two major creative personalities of the century, Chaplin and Remarque; and of a well-known actor, Burgess Meredith--and now entrancing an elderly, stern sadhu! How can one account for this? One can't. One can simply ascribe it to the manifestation of Power, of Shakti, and salute.

Once Sri Ramakrishna mused in wonder: "Ah, the capacity to attract others! What a miracle!" Thus he recognized the power of Shakti and paid it his homage.

The possession of Shakti in some special form or quality is the source of what we call the exceptional. Its possession and expression are what make an artist, for example, or a writer, outstanding. Such successes cannot be explained by the rules of aesthetics. The artist may not himself know how he does what he does. Consider the French writer Georges Simenon, author of a hundred detective novels, many of them renowned for their literary excellence. Simenon stated that the whole book simply formed in his mind, and in a space of several days, shut away from everybody, he simply committed what was already 'there' to paper. Some talented persons know their possession to be a great gift, are awed by it, reverent towards it, and feel they don't deserve it, but are thankful for the goods it brings. Most are apprehensive that the power may decline or vanish; and we know that sometimes it does.

What is the explanation? God plays in this way, that is all. It's his game, his lila. Shakti stirs up the world; Shakti brings movement, contrast, excitement, difference. As Swami Vivekananda once said, if it weren't for Shakti, we'd all be like Egyptian mummies in a museum sightlessly staring at one another. Shakti gives flavor to life, yet also engineers life's tragedies and despairs--which make us sick at last of the play and, all passion spent, seek out Shakti's consort Shiva, Brahman's inactive aspect; and eventually Brahman himself. This is the scheme of things. It is graphically laid out for all to see in the icon of Kali.

I am writing this in an effort to explain Chris and why I found him so interesting. He was simply a great and grateful incorporation of Shakti. Chris was genuinely somebody, hence inspiring, quickening, to me, as to so many others. But I know that the fascination I feel centers on the Power of which he was but a vessel. My delight in him is thus indirectly delight in the Divine, my admiration is admiration for the Divine. I know this. And so, I think, did he, not only with respect to me but with respect to all who offered him their esteem.

8.

I first met Chris in the spring of 1949 at the Vedanta Temple in Hollywood. Swami Prabhavananda gave weekly readings in the so-called Green House, which contained the church parlor. On this particular evening Chris was present. Swami asked Chris and me to fetch a few folding chairs from the Temple just across the walkway. My first impression was that he looked boyish, clean, and bright. He was very approachable, and as a reader of his writings I was his long-time admirer, so we became friends quickly.

I have related in my book *What Vedanta Means to Me* how the Prabhavananda-Isherwood Bhagavad-Gita affected my thinking in the mid-1940's, inspiring me to begin the experiment which led to my joining the Center in Southern California; so Chris was to me a sort of religious mentor. He also represented the best in British-American writing. I'd been a fan of Auden-Isherwood-Spender since college days. (In 1977 I saw the exhibition at the London Portrait Gallery "Writers of the Thirties". This displayed a collection of memorabilia concerning Stephen Spender, W.C. Auden, John Day Lewis,

Robert MacNeice, and Isherwood.) A known figure and an admired writer had become my friend.

Chris usually came to see Swami Prabhavananda about once a week--usually for dinner and the evening. He drove a Sunshine Talbot roadster in those days, and later a different make of small British car which never seemed to work properly. I believe he was rather poor at that time. He was always a welcome guest, as he was full of good humor and told amusing stories about personalities he knew in the film colony or encountered in the world of writers. His relationship with Swami Prabhavananda was respectful but very intimate. Whereas we were all rather standoffish with our guru, Chris was quite daring toward him, and Swami liked this.

As editor of the revue "Vedanta and the West" I had many occasions to talk to Chris. Swami Prabhavananda always had some co-authorship project going on with Chris, who methodically turned out a translation of Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms, called How to Know God, and Shankara's The Crest Jewel of Discrimination. He wrote the introduction for a book I edited of Vivekananda's writings condensed: What Religion Is: In the Words of Swami Vivekananda. He contributed to our revue and did ever so many other literary chores, always with promptness and good humor, and always without compensation.

The Prabhavananda-Isherwood Bhagavad-Gita is now an established classic. It is included in Everyman's Library and in the Mentor Religious Classics series. Hundreds of thousands of copies have been sold. An unusual tribute to the merit of the work comes annually from French members of the Centre Védantique Ramakrishna at Gretz. I have a practice of reading aloud in English the eighteenth chapter during the annual birthday celebration for Sri Krishna. And it always happens that two or three of the French members say afterwards: "Although I don't know English and didn't understand exactly what you were reading, the text sounded beautiful and right."

Chris had lived at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood as a preprobationer for a couple of years in the early 1940's. He made things very lively there, as one will gather by reading his souvenirs of that period in My Guru and his Disciple. Here is the complete text of a ditty he composed, to make life merry while he and the other disciples did the dishes. It is sung to the tune of "Bye, Bye, Blackbird".

There was a man lived in Bengal:
He had no ego, none at all,
Ramakrishna.
Never wore a derby hat,
Taught his devotees "Thou art That".
Krishna, jai, jai!

For he prayed and prayed and prayed so hard he
Kept on going right into samadhi.
You could yell in his ear and tickle his toe
And pull his beard, for he'd never know.

Krishna, jai, jai!

G. C. Ghosh he was no monk,
Showed up one evening rolling drunk,
So Ramakrishna
Said, "Why waste dough on liquor, you fool,
When the bliss of God's got a kick like a mule?"
Krishna, jai, jai!

In came Naren as fresh as paint,
Said, "My, your old superstitions are quaint!"
So Ramakrishna
Put his foot on his chest and began to press
Till the kid didn't know his home address.
Krishna, jai, jai!

Keshab said, "I wish you'd been
With me in London when I met the Queen."
But Ramakrishna
Said, "Listen, old boy, and don't get cross,
I don't have to meet her 'cause I know her boss."
Krishna, jai, jai!

M. wrote down his words for publication;
Now they're read throughout the Hindu nation.
And in fifty more years, we are such dopes,
We'll have made him a church with priests and popes.
Krishna, jai jai!

Chris's experiment as Vedanta novice didn't work out very well. The Vedanta Society was particularly boisterous at that time due to the expressed temperaments of several residents, to Swami Prabhavananda's suit against the U.S. Government to keep his Bengali nephew from being drafted into the American Army, and because the ashrama was run on the lines of a Bengali joint family, as described in the previous chapter. "Oh Prema," Chris often said to me years later, during his visits to 1946 Vedanta Place, "I do so admire you for sticking it out. How thankful I am to have exchanged the excitement of the religious life for the peace and tranquility of the world!"

Celebrities and celebrity hunters sometimes came to call on him when Chris lived at the Vedanta Society, including Greta Garbo. She was intrigued by Chris's entrance into monastic life and proposed to Swami Prabhavananda that she should come to live at the Center too.

"But our monastery is for men," Swami replied, agreeably amused by the great star, "and you are a girl."

"Doesn't matter; I'll put on trousers," was her response.

She played up to Swami: "Oh how I love to look into those deep, dark, mysterious eyes." Swami was pleased. I have heard him recount this story dozens of times, always pronouncing what Garbo proposed to put on as "trowshers".

I regretted having joined too late to have been present on that occasion. I often told Chris, "The only thing I ever want from you is for you to introduce me to Garbo." But this never worked out. He, however, did invite me to a big Hollywood party. It must have been in about 1961 or 1962. I treasure this experience, even though I concluded that once was enough. It was exactly as one pictures this sort of occasion, held in a big house looking down over Beverly Hills--Glenn Ford's house, which Chris had borrowed for the affair, as his own was too small. Celebrities galore.

I was asked to drive Aldous Huxley, who lived at that time in the Hollywood Hills near our center. The Center's car was a Volkswagen minibus, in the high front seat of which I gently installed the very nearly blind, compliant Aldous. During the trip to Beverly Hills he told me all about his current writing project, the novel *Island*. Dear Aldous! Swami always referred to him as "Such a good man" and regretted that the death of his first wife Maria had deprived him of a guiding hand. His Utopia in *Island* was an isolated spot in the Pacific where everyone is good and children are given sex training at an early age so as not to suffer psychological hang-ups later. Aldous was enthusiastic and seemingly believed it all.

Glenn Ford was there, and his wife Eleanor Powell. So were Igor Stravinsky and his secretary, Robert Craft, then a callow looking young man, who later was to rise to such fame as biographer of Stravinsky and authority on music.

I spent a lot of time sitting on the floor with Alec Guinness, recalling with him scenes from *The Lavender Hill Mob* in which he wore a laughably long scarf, and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. There were ever so many other guests. One was a starlet, or would-be starlet, of exceptional beauty who questioned me very seriously indeed about Vedanta. I answered willingly enough, although much at the same time regretting that she should waste her charm and evening's possibilities on someone who could advance her career not at all. The memory I treasure most from that evening was the sight of Huxley and Stravinsky sitting side by side on a sofa conversing animatedly in French. "Now I've really seen the great world," I said to myself, hugely content.

I used to discuss with Chris the many incredible incidents which spiced our days at the Vedanta Society; he was amused by these recitals, having himself years before been present for similar happenings. One of these incidents concerned a devotee couple whom I shall call Lila and Joe Leland. They earned their livelihood as movie extras, bit players, film dialogue writers, and so on. They lived near the Temple. Both were alcoholic and were said when drinking to engage in vicious quarrels. They were exceptionally nice when sober and for some reason they both liked and even admired me. The door to my room opened directly onto the Temple garden. Every once in a while in the middle of the night I would be awakened by someone pounding on my door and there would stand Lila, terribly drunk. "Oh Johnny,"

she would cry (she never shifted to my brahmachari name), "save me. I'm drunk and I had a terrible row with Joe; I hate myself so. Why are we like this? Johnny, you're so good. You were worldly once but you reformed. How did you do it? Oh tell me, so I can do it too!" I would quiet her and send her home.

One afternoon the telephone rang and it was Lila. "Johnny, come quick; I've just killed Joe." I raced to the Leland apartment two or three blocks away. Lila met me at the door, crying wildly. "Oh Johnny, look." Sure enough, there was Joe lying on the floor in the middle of the room, his face covered with a cloth. A policeman stood nearby. I felt relieved to think, given the circumstances, that the incident would be put down to self-defense and Lila would be exonerated.

Lila pulled me to the bedroom and sat me down on the bed beside her. "Oh Johnny, how could I have done it? We were both drunk and he said something I didn't like and so I circled my arm around his neck like this and pulled." (Her demonstration was a bit more realistic than I cared for.)

"Lila, for heaven's sake, speak more softly; there's a policeman out there."

"You know I'm big, have a lot of strength, and I just pulled and suddenly, Oh Johnny, suddenly Joe fell down. And I knew he was dead."

"Sh-h-h-h," I kept cautioning.

"I'm no good, Johnny. I want to be good like you, Johnny, but I don't know how." Then she lay down and went to sleep, which gave me a chance to slip out, half-paralyzed with shock.

The end of the story is that Lila was hospitalized as a psychotic alcoholic and died a few weeks later.

This was Chris's response, when I related the frightful incident: "Oh Prema, how lucky you are! You are fortunate! No one has ever confessed to me that he's murdered somebody!"

9.

Swami Prabhavananda had always hoped to inspire Chris to write the life of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami said that realizing this project was to be the culminating accomplishment of his life. There existed at that time in English only the official life, published in India, and the English translation of Romain Rolland's biography *Prophets of the New India*. Chris began at last around 1957 and finished the book in 1964. As usual he wrote neatly, systematically, turning out chapter after chapter, which he brought to the Green House living room on his weekly visits, to read to the devotees. He invited and accepted their criticisms graciously. The entire text was submitted chapter by chapter to the then General Secretary in India, Swami Madhavananda, who often made corrections of fact and even of language. The latter type of correction sometimes made Chris smart, but generally he accepted suggested changes humbly or occasionally worked out compromises.

The major source of facts concerning Ramakrishna is a huge Bengali book called "Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prasagna" or Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master. Written by a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, Swami Saradananda, who was himself a realized soul, the book is a storehouse of fascinating detail about a divine incarnation. But, being a compilation of souvenirs and comments set down at different times, devoid of any all-over scheme, Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master contains much overlapping and backtracking. In addition, the English translation remains so reminiscent of the Bengali original in structure and language that whole passages, while made up of English words, produce hardly any meaning. Chris took the pains to make a précis of the whole book, so as to put the material in usable chronological order. During this period he frequently expostulated, when arriving for our Wednesday nights, "Swami Saradananda was no doubt a saint, but what a mess his book is!"

Ramakrishna and his Disciples was published in 1965, in an American, an English, and an Indian edition. I had the pleasure, while in India, of researching and assembling the illustrations. The book was at first not a major success and even went out of print for some time except for the Indian edition. But by the mid-1980's it began to gain popularity. It is now available through the Vedanta Press in paperback, and in England has come out in a new edition by Shephard-Walwyn. Once I asked Chris if he had discussed frankly with Swami Prabhavananda his own opinion of the book. Chris replied, "No, I haven't, for I feel it is not a great book. Certainly not the book I would have written if left alone. It is only a pious biography. I might get drunk in a bar and recount more vividly in a few sentences the greatness of Ramakrishna than I did in that whole volume."

Chris disliked India. He had stopped there hurriedly in 1957 to see Dakshineswar and Kamarpukur while he was preparing to start the Ramakrishna book, and found India "all a big muddle". But he went obediently as special guest for the closing of the Vivekananda Centenary celebration in late 1963 and early 1964 because his guru wanted that so much. Here is what he wrote me on October 22, 1963, as he prepared for the voyage. I was already in India preparing to take sannyas.

I guess you can imagine how I feel about coming to India; almost unmixed horror.... However, Swami begged, and I couldn't or didn't refuse and now I must make the best of it. On top of all this, it has occurred to me quite often that maybe you are "getting into the mood" to take sannyas; and here comes this disturbing reminder of the beef-eating outside world, a visitor from the City of Night!

I later saw here the first intimation of what was to develop into Chris's last and perhaps best novel, *A Meeting By the River*.

...Well, anyhow, I believe that is how I might feel, were I in such an improbable situation. So if I find you rather shunning me, I shall perfectly understand, believe me! Or am I being stupid? In any case, I shall either be out of India by January 10, or too sick to be moved, or already dead! That much I promise. And, of course, speaking selfishly, from my point of view, you would be my only support during the horrors of the conference, or whatever they call it.

During sessions of the Parliament Chris gave several lively talks. One on Swami Vivekananda, another on his conception of and reverence for the guru. He was treated with the greatest respect, which meant, considering the circumstances, rendered adulation as a religious spokesman. All that the audiences knew about him was that he was a literary celebrity who was Prabhavananda's disciple and co-translator, and had come from America to speak on religious topics at the Parliament. It is unlikely that many of his auditors were familiar with much of Chris's work at first hand, certainly not with what Chris termed his "secular works". To be treated as a religious leader was a situation intolerable to Chris's hatred of sham. What happened is recounted in the following entry from my journal:

Friday, January 3, 1964. Belur Math. Chris was given a round-the-world air ticket to come here and speak at the Parliament of Religions. Yesterday he appeared, returned ahead of time from an excursion to Maharaj's village, which he had abandoned with the excuse that he was not feeling good. Privately he told me what had happened. Being on display, written up by newspapers, giving lectures, being supposedly a religious celebrity, he grew nauseated with the role--actually blew off at Swami. Said he'd never be placed in such a false position again. "I feel like an absolute whore. It is as though my serious work must be considered to be done by a secret Mr. Hyde. I don't feel like that at all. Within my lights the novels I write are serious, expressing a kind of truth as I see it. Speaking on religion--which means being considered religious--puts me in a false position. I'll never do it again. I told Swami and he didn't understand one word. 'I don't want to lose you, Chris,' is what he said."

Chris left India the same day we completed our vows, feeling, I think, that the experience had been a fiasco. But a few months later things turned out otherwise. The idea for a new novel was born out of those few trying days at Belur Math. He told me that he felt this to be one of Sri Ramakrishna's little jokes, or perhaps his reward for having acceded to his guru's demand despite his own disinclination.

A Meeting by the River concerns two brothers. The elder, Patrick, is a successful man of the world and a devoted hedonist; the younger, Oliver, a monastic novice and candidate for sannyas. The two meet after a long separation at a Hindu monastery on the Ganges just as Oliver is about to pronounce his vows. As they meet, each is prepared to reject the point of view of the other, attitudes made more intense by the remnants of old sibling rivalries. This is how Chris expressed the work's inception in a letter he wrote me on March 15, 1964, as he was about to begin work:

The "idea" for a (very short) novel based on the experience of my visit to India is very slight at present and hard to present to you in a manner which will even sound interesting. But, for many years I have been playing with the problem of a confrontation--two people who are like two halves of a larger person, and who represent diametrically opposite ways of life. So I said to myself, how about two brothers--they haven't seen each other in a long while--one is in the world, the other has been rather mysteriously absent in India for some

years--and suddenly out of the blue this brother writes to the other in America and says, I am taking sannyas on such and such a date--it would be nice to see you--and the American brother anyhow has a business trip which will take him to Asia and he thinks well why not--and they meet--and they are very polite--but then the American brother bursts out how can you do this unnatural mad thing? And the other brother says, quite sweetly, well you see, I think your way of life is just as unnatural and mad. And they have a long talk and get absolutely nowhere and the brother goes back to America and the new Swami goes off someplace to take up his duties, and that is that....No, I know I am not making it sound exactly thrilling, but I do smell something....

As we now know, the novel, as developed, did turn out to be thrilling, and in addition psychologically very interesting. The incipient Oliver whom Patrick discovers in himself, and the inquieting dose of Patrick which Oliver has to face in his own character, are dealt with by each brother's acceptance of the other, and in turn of himself as well. Each becomes reconciled with, each learns to deal with, inquieting factors of his own personality, these perceptions mysteriously fostered by the spiritual atmosphere of the monastery. The book is far subtler than a parable of bad versus good which it appears to be at first glance. Gore Vidal in a review written for "The New York Review of Books" classed *A Meeting by the River* as one of Chris's best.

In writing this book Chris produced a work which met not badly his criteria of the religious novel. As argued earlier in this chapter, to produce a true religious novel, the author must demonstrate the validity of spirituality through showing its redemptive effects on the non-religious--something technically difficult to accomplish. *A Meeting by the River* succeeds as a religious novel in that its two protagonists experience a broadening and deepening of their character, produced by their contact with the spiritual atmosphere of the monastery and the monastic personnel encountered there, the confrontation with each other, the mystery of sannyas, and something like a gratuitous movement of grace.

I supplied technical assistance useful to Chris's description of the sannyas ordination ceremony and read, and humbly offered appraisals of, various drafts of the developing novel. This was delightful work.

But now it would be wise to show the manuscript to Swami Prabhavananda. Much in it, while fictionalized, was based on people and events linked to the Ramakrishna Order and would be recognized as such. There was only one impediment: Swami might object to the realistic depiction of the homosexual affair between Patrick and a boy in Los Angeles named Tom, who is, it might be said, Patrick's emotional counterpart of Oliver's guru. Perhaps Swami would reject the book on the basis of this. Chris was prepared to abandon the whole project if he did. But the contrary occurred. This is how Chris reported the matter in a letter dated June 13, 1966, addressed to me in Gretz, where I had just taken up my new post:

Wonder of wonders, Swami liked the novel! He said, "When I finished the last chapter I found there were two tears running down my cheeks!" The funny and sweet thing was, he was just as relieved as I was, because he didn't have to condemn it in any way! He even

said it should be sold in the [Hollywood Temple] bookshop, but I think he was just being carried away by the emotion of the moment! I shall shudder to think how terribly some of the Family are going to disapprove, but there isn't a thing they can do about it!

The letter continued as follows:

[Now]...there is the question of the dedication. The book "belongs" naturally to you, if you will accept it--but you may very well decide that this would be unsuitable, compromising, or otherwise imprudent. (I should dedicate it "To John Yale", of course.)

Eventually the book was dedicated to Gerald Heard, and I lost, perhaps forever, a chance to achieve literary immortality! This is how it happened. Since I had taken a new birth at Belur Math on January 7, 1964, and a new name, it seemed a form of backsliding to be mentioned on the dedication page in terms of my abandoned name. I told Chris that. He was enthusiastic about the idea of dedicating the book to Swami Vidyatmananda in that it would add an element of intrigue. However (letter of August 15, 1966):

When Swami P found that the novel was dedicated to you as Swami Vidyatmananda I could see that he was dubious about it--that's to say that he would have preferred me to dedicate it to John Yale. However, he didn't make any positive objection and so I just let it ride. Well, yesterday he called me from Laguna Beach and told me that he had told Pavitrananda, who is staying with him there [a senior disciple of Swami Brahmananda and member of the Board of Trustees of the Order, who was leader of the Vedanta Society of New York] about the dedication, and that Pavitrananda had reacted much more strongly--saying that he felt Belur Math wouldn't like it at all, to have a novel dedicated to a Swami by his monastic name!

I was disappointed, but there seemed no course other than to reject the honor Chris was ready to pay me.

But in a typical gesture of doing just the right thing, Chris eventually expressed his thanks and assuaged my disappointment by making Oliver's brahmachari name Prema in the dramatized version of *A Meeting by the River*. This play was staged successfully in Los Angeles and in some other cities, but ran only for a few performances following its opening on Broadway on March 28, 1979.

During the years following 1967, when *A Meeting by the River* was published, I had little direct contact with Chris. These were the years when my relations with Swami Prabhavananda were so poor, as described in Chapter Four. Although Chris saw our guru regularly and surely must have heard from him many accounts of my supposed apostacy, he remained as cordial as ever toward me (April 27, 1970):

I have said this once and I'll say it again--as far as I am concerned, our personal friendship, my deep affection for you and the memory of all we have been through together--can't possibly be affected by our respective relations to Vedanta Place.

As to what he was doing, Chris said that he was working on Volume II of his autobiography, which was to follow the recently published Kathleen and Frank. This volume was published in 1976 as Christopher and his Kind.

11.

Now I come to an issue concerning Chris which I find very difficult to deal with: why in this second volume of his autobiography did Chris at seventy deem it necessary to emphasize so explicitly his longtime and continuing interest in homosexual sex? Is the composition of a book in which an erotic element dominates right livelihood for a devotee? This conundrum was puzzled over by many who loved Chris and appreciated all he has done for the cause of Vedanta. Is there a logical answer? That Chris was a devotee there can be no doubt. He was in many ways an ideal devotee. He outlines his growing interest in Vedanta in the booklet Approach to Vedanta: he even stated it a little belligerently in the Introduction to Ramakrishna and his Disciples. He opened his heart in his contribution to my book What Vedanta Means to Me when he said:

... I only know that, as far as I am concerned, the guru-disciple relationship is at the centre of everything that religion means to me. It is the one reality of which I am never in doubt, the one guarantee that I shall ultimately surmount my own weakness and find knowledge of eternal peace and joy. If, having known this relationship, I could in some terrible way be deprived of it again, then my life would become a nightmare of guilt, boredom and self-disgust.

In his Presidential Address at the Parliament of Religions in Calcutta Chris identified himself not as a Hindu or a Vedantist but as a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna; and made the point that one of the attributes that attracted him to Ramakrishna was Ramakrishna's capacity to fully accept an artist and bohemian such as Girish Chandra Ghosh--the implication of this statement being that if Ramakrishna could accept and reform Girish, then Chris himself had a chance.

Besides these declarations, Chris's actions proclaimed him to be a devotee. It is hard to imagine anyone more willing to do chores for his guru and his "church" than he.

He maintained his own particular form of householder life with fidelity. In his last letter to me dated, March 12, 1985, he said:

My life is much as usual. Don and I continue to live in a state of harmonious occupation--he paints and draws people; I write....Meanwhile we continue to live as devotees, making japam, etc.

Chris sometimes even assumed an almost devotional attitude toward me. He delighted in the "success" I had attained in being able to take sannyas. He often proclaimed that I, as a formerly worldly American who had become a Ramakrishna swami, would become an inspiring example to others. Such was Chris's

generous heart. Here is how he expressed himself on October 22, 1963:

Well bless you, Prema dear--or rather, bless me. You will be one of the few Swamis I could take the dust of the feet of [which he actually did two months later and which he has Patrick do before Oliver in A Meeting by the River] and "mean" it, because you have really been through something which I can appreciate and measure the tremendousness of. It wasn't easy, I know!

It has been a problem to me how anybody could be as close a devotee as Chris was and at the same time concern himself so much in his work with sex. Once I voiced this puzzlement to Swami Prabhavananda. He stared at me as though I had uttered a blasphemy, then pronounced these words with incredible power: "Prema, remember this: always love Chris." (Swami often spoke of Chris's faith in his guru--Prabhavananda himself--as so utter that he himself envied faith of that magnitude.) On another occasion Swami said, "Chris is practically a saint, except for that one small weakness."

I suppose it can be claimed that the subject matter of Christopher and his Kind is of legitimate artistic interest. He traced the events of his life and times from 1929 to 1939. And in the book Chris said what he had to say on the topic of the homosexual preference, using his own life's experiences to describe predilections which are common to many human beings. In his novels and then in his autobiography, Chris laid bare the human psyche as related to the homosexual preference as few others have done and so, it may be said, gave a picture of God's incredible diversity. Isn't that a kind of worship? And it is certain that many homosexuals all over the world revere Chris as a kind of patron saint, and have been guided toward religious faith because of him.

I just don't know. I can only leave the question open. Who am I to try to evaluate anyone Shakti has favored as much as him?

Ramakrishna once said, "Maya doesn't follow rules or conform to man's order of logic. There's no lawfulness in maya." This is something literal people like me have a hard time learning. Truth reveals itself sometimes in very surprising fashions, even through contradictions. We may apply this to the case of the artist, one Shakti has singularly favored. It is illogical to apply everyday rules to non-everyday situations.

I learned from my guru: "You may be in for some surprises. Don't ever judge a human situation until you know the end of the story." Were we, I asked myself, just being set up to be knocked over by another of Ramakrishna's little jokes?

12.

Yes, it seems that we were. For as I was mulling over these mysteries the third volume of Chris's autobiography came out: My Guru and his Disciple. Thus Shakti exhibited her capacity to confound and delight. My Guru and his Disciple is a book which is even more devotional than A Meeting by the River,

a book which could be offered to our guru (if he were still alive) without anxiety and placed before devotees, Indian as well as Western, without hesitation--an Isherwood "secular work" which actually was put on sale in the Vedanta bookshop.

Who but Chris would have been capable of revealing to a large public the intimate life of a mystic, rendering spiritual attainment convincing and beautiful? Who else but he, among all those who knew Swami Prabhavananda, took the pains to record, year in and year out, those revelations he heard from his guru which would show us, after he had departed, what was going on inside a man of God? Comparable in its different field to Alfred Kinsey's reports of his investigations of the erotic impulse, Chris's memorial to Prabhavananda is a scientifically valid account of the religious impulse, the spiritual preference. And at the same time, so artistically done, in the tradition of great devotional literature. One critic called it the best book of devotion of this century.

13.

Surely, Chris was somebody. He was a King, a "lead cow". And if the writing of this autobiography of mine has no value other than to show him as he was--Shakti's special creation, one of Shakti's most engaging vehicles for displaying herself to the world and to me--then I shall consider that writing these memoirs will have been worth the effort.

As Chris implied, and as the circumstances themselves suggested, A Meeting by the River was an artistic rendering of the actual events which occurred in India during the days of my sannyas ordination, Chris being loosely Patrick and me Oliver. But only now, five years after Chris has gone, it dawns on me that the two halves of the same person Chris had mentioned in his letter to me perhaps in his own way referred to Chris himself. While undoubtedly identifying with Patrick, didn't Chris in his own mind think of himself to be Oliver also--the other brother who takes sannyas (see my description of the ceremony in Chapter Eight) and devotes himself to spiritual life? A nostalgia for the life he had tried as a monastic probationer at Hollywood bubbled away, as it were, on a back burner. Despite his vigorous efforts to throw off Victorian attitudes about "right and wrong", Chris was, I often felt, not quite easy in the role of Christopher Isherwood. True to his practice of making all his characters facets of himself, he wrote himself into the script of A Meeting by the River not only as the worldly brother but also as the swami he might have become. He would have disclaimed this, of course--and now it is too late to find out.

Several of those who knew him well have spoken of the incredible change of character which occurred in Chris's last days; and Chris himself wrote in his journal a month or two before he died that he often woke up "in a state of inexplicable happiness." As Prabhavananda had said so often: "It works, my child; it really does work."

Chris surely stands a good chance of being looked back to in years to come as an Early Church Father of the new sangha, on the basis of certain of his literary contributions produced under the direction of or concerning Swami Prabhavananda. Yes, he and I used to speculate about this and laugh hilariously! Ah,

what history doesn't know! But I would that Christopher Isherwood should be remembered also for the grandeur of his nature and the inspiring ardor of his devotion.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Six

The Devotee as Friend of Swami Vivekananda

1.

It wasn't long, after I took up my new life at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, before I fell under the charm of Swami Vivekananda. My worn copy of Vedanta for the Western World is before me now. Pencil marks of four decades ago underline: "Vivekananda is preeminently the prophet of self-reliance, of courage, of individual enquiry and effort". He was to be all that and more for me in the years that followed.

One's first acquaintance with Vivekananda is usually made through his writings and recorded talks. This also happened in my case. Almost the first thing I did as a Vedanta student was to read straight through the eight volumes of Swamiji's Complete Works. It would have been difficult to have accepted at once anything so foreign to my Yankee origins as Hinduism. But Vivekananda helped me to absorb Indian thought painlessly, and for this I thanked him. He made Vedanta plausible and not exotic at all. (Partly he accomplished this through his grand sense of humor.)

And I admired Swamiji for his mastery of the English language. I marveled then as I marvel still at his ability to express profound philosophical ideas in simple, interesting English.

Later I had a chance to get to know Swamiji's thought even better through editing a condensation of those Complete Works. The book that resulted was entitled What Religion Is: In the Words of Swami Vivekananda. We hoped it would become a paperback sold through newstands. Christopher Isherwood contributed a lively biographical introduction. But the book came out in the United States and in England in hardback editions, and after some years went out of print. Then it was taken up by the Advaita Ashrama in India, which did issue it in a paperback which has, I believe, sold well. Eventually--why not?--the volume's intended destiny may be fulfilled and we shall find the best of Vivekananda beckoning readers from the racks of drugstores, bus stations, and newspaper kiosks in the Common arket countries, and--again, why not?--even in Eastern Europe.

The crusader's call in Vivekananda's writings attracted me. My experience as a businessman during the Chicago period had not crushed the idealist. I was more than ever looking for a way of life and a spiritual orientation which allowed a person to become vast, authentic, and integrated. So I found Vivekananda's invitation to spiritual life most appealing. "Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep." "Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is in being and becoming; it is realization." "It is good and very grand to conquer external nature, but grander still to conquer our internal nature." He called for heroism and effort: "Men, men, these are wanted: everything else will be ready, but strong, vigorous, believing young men, sincere to the backbone, are wanted. A hundred such and the world becomes revolutionized." To this invitation I responded

enthusiastically. At last I knew what I wanted to do--to enlist in his band of helpers. I had found my purpose in life. I had taken up arms under an admirable leader.

2.

As time went on my acquaintance with Swami Vivekananda was advanced through acquaintance with several people who had personally known him and who helped me form a living link with him.

The first of these was Sister Lalita--Mrs. Carrie Mead Wyckoff. She was one of the three Mead sisters in whose South Pasadena home Swamiji had stayed in the winter of 1900 when he was lecturing in Southern California. Through her assistance the Vedanta Society in neighboring Hollywood was founded thirty years later. In her summer home there at 1946 Ivar Avenue (now Vedanta Place) the lectures were originally given and Swami Prabhavananda housed. And later Sister surrendered her beloved flower garden on the adjoining plot of land for its site, when it became possible to build the Temple in 1938.

Sister died in 1949, a year after I began attending the Society. I cannot claim that I really knew her. But I saw her several times: a small, elderly lady, often dressed in old-fashioned lavender, with a white knitted shawl, serenely moving about the premises. It is said she talked often of Swami Vivekananda and that he came to her in vision when she died. A whole lifetime had been given purpose by the Indian guest whom she had known but for a few weeks. Swami Prabhavananda, whenever he talked of Sister, called her a saint.

The second living contact with Swamiji was by way of Josephine MacLeod--Tantine. She too was residing at the Hollywood center when I first attended services there; and there she died a few months after Sister died, in the autumn of 1949. Tall and extremely thin, with a deeply sallow skin, Miss MacLeod seemed very old to me--as indeed she was. She had been a genuine eccentric--the kind of person who does original, appropriate things without thought of self or consequences. There was a trace of that old strength in her still. On the several times when I saw her I looked upon Miss MacLeod as a most precious relic, because of her deep friendship with Vivekananda and all that she had done to advance his work. Just think, it was to Miss MacLeod that he had addressed the words in his last letter to her: "You have been good angel to me" and a short time before that: "...and to you, dear Joe, Pranams."

Then there were the Allans of San Francisco--an old couple who had known Swamiji when he was in the Bay Region in 1900. In 1952 I spent a day with the Allans, listening to their enthusiastic recollections of Swamiji. They were in their eighties then and were to die shortly after. Some of what Edith Allen recounted to me is contained in her memories, originally published in the "Vedanta Kesari" in 1924 under the name of Viraja Devi, and later incorporated into the valuable Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda. Most of the remainder of what Edith and Tom Allan related appears in the memories of Ujjvala (Ida Ansell) printed in the same volume.

To the Allans Swamiji was as alive in 1952 as he had been fifty years before. They made him live for

me. In their dining room there was a picture of him placed so that whenever there was a meal those dining faced Vivekananda. And here is how they described him, written down just as the Allans said it: "The beauty of Swamiji nobody can imagine. His face, his hands, his feet, all were beautiful. Swami Trigunatita later said that Swamiji's hands were far more beautiful than any woman's. Swamiji's color would seem to change, some days being darker and some days lighter, but usually there was about it what can best be described as a golden glow."

And there was Ujjvala. She lived the last years of her life at the Hollywood center, dying there on January 31, 1955. Since she had spent her life as a stenographer it was natural that she should help me with office work, to which I had been assigned. So I grew to know Ujjvala well. My recollections of her are recorded in Chapter Twelve of this book.

Ujjvala used to talk much about Swamiji, and something which interested me greatly was that she possessed, somewhere in the horde of keepsakes, a dozen or so unpublished lectures of Swami Vivekananda which she had taken down in shorthand in the San Francisco area in the spring of 1900. An altogether marvelous link with Swamiji, and something which surely should be given to the world before Ujjvala should die.

But Ujjvala was a procrastinator. She was aware that she had this tendency to put things off and struggled against it. Mottos urging energy and action adorned her walls and filled her notebooks. Her intentions were good. So she and I made a pact which had the effect of encouraging transcription of the lectures. The agreement was that she should not come to the office (where she loved to be because there was more excitement there than in her room) any day until after she had worked at least two hours on the transcriptions. Thus Ujjvala got the work done. Thirteen lectures came out of those old stenographer's books, and as they made their appearance, clearly it was Swamiji speaking. They are now contained in Vivekananda's Complete Works. Ujjvala had always dreamed of becoming a famous authoress. Of course this never occurred. But with the entry of these lectures into the official canon of Vivekananda, Ujjvala became far more than a mere writer; she became a transmitter of divine writ!

In Ujjvala's crowded room there hung on the wall a framed portrait of Swamiji. It was a fairly well known photograph taken in Alameda, California, in April, 1900. In it Swamiji is shown with long hair, parted in the middle and falling back to the neck, according to a style worn by some orators of the day. He is wearing a clerical coat and vest buttoned high, with a white clerical collar. There are blossoms in the background. The story of the picture is that Swamiji and several devotees were in the garden of a friend. Swamiji was lying at ease on the grass, enjoying the conversation and participating in it. Someone came who wanted to take his picture, but he did not want to get up. Urged to do so, he stood up, just as he was, before the background of flowering vines, without turban, and not posing at all. He looks as though he is about to speak.

I loved that picture because, it being a contemporary print and kept all those years by Ujjvala, it almost seemed a personal relic of Vivekananda's. When Ujjvala died and we distributed her possessions, this is the one inheritance I claimed.

Since then I have kept the picture near me. The eyes are wonderful. There is a compassionate look in them. As I said, he looks as though he were about to speak. Sometimes I fancy the glass is thinning, the black-and-white photographic paper is taking on life and depth. What would he say if he were to speak? Perhaps: "Never mind failures; they are quite natural, they are the beauty of life--these failures. What would life be without them? It would not be worth having if it were not for struggles. Where would be the poetry of life? Never mind the struggles, the mistakes. I never heard a cow tell a lie, but it is only a cow--never a man. So never mind these failures, these little backslidings; hold the ideal a thousand times; and if you fail a thousand times, make the attempt once more."

3.

A further step in growing to know and love Vivekananda was taken by going to places where he had been. I am attached to him through many associations of place. Near Hollywood there were two. There was Sister's little house in South Pasadena; and there was the old Universalist Church in Pasadena. Later, when I went to Europe to live, there were several others such as a whole series of addresses in Paris, Perros Guirec on the Brittany Coast, and the village of Saas-Fee in Switzerland. And curiously, in later years, as I learned more details of Swamiji's stays in Chicago, I realized that during my Chicago period I had lived in the very region he had frequented--the Near North Side. As the Hale residence at 1415 North Dearborn Avenue had by then become a lodging house, I wondered if by chance I hadn't even lived there for a time or at least known and visited friends who had. And of course the Art Institute, where Swamiji gave that first address at the Parliament of Religions which was to make him famous, was my frequent resort on Sunday afternoons. Could it be that he had showed grace to me even before I had heard his name?

In 1955 I was having dinner with a devotee who lived in South Pasadena. A talented salesman, he had a hearty admiration for Swamiji's strength and drive. Swami Prabhavananda had named him Vireswar. We were talking of Swamiji.

"Did you know," I asked, "that a house where he lived for six weeks in 1900 is nearby?"

"No," Vireswar exclaimed, greatly excited.

"We have often wished the Society might acquire it as a permanent memorial to Swamiji; but there is the problem of the purchase price and also we would need someone to look after the house should it become the Society's responsibility."

We drove over and looked at Sister's former residence at 309 Monterey Road. One could see that it had never been much changed, much rebuilt. You could tell by its style that the front door was the original front door by which Swamiji had entered and left the house. The wooden front steps and porch were worn; so much so that it was apparent that they had never been replaced. The planks were the very planks that his feet had touched. We arranged to gain entrance to the house. It was being used as a workshop for light manufacturing. The interior was in disorder but did not seem to have been modified and was not dirty.

Soon a sale was consummated. Vireswar helped buy the house for the Society and made his home there as caretaker. From behind the disorder the original residence emerged, much as it must have been in Swamiji's time.

In later years when I stepped into Swamiji's tiny bedroom on the second floor, which became the shrineroom, I tried to see him there, sleeping, or changing his clothes, or washing his face and hands, or considering what he would say in the next lecture; and I thought: "One more means of identification with you."

And there was the Universalist church at the corner of Raymond Avenue and Chestnut Street in Pasadena. It was a large, steepled, all-wooden structure. It must have been built in the 1880's. Grizzled Italian cypresses, which in the early, romantic days of Pasadena's founding were popular in California landscaping, stood in the yard. The church was near what had once been the center of Pasadena, just north of the Santa Fe railroad station and the Green Hotel, and close to the old city park, all sites known to Swamiji. The Shakespeare Club, where Swamiji gave several talks, was a block away. This is not a desirable part of town now; but in its day this church must have been one of Pasadena's most fashionable. It was here that Swamiji gave the renowned "The Way to the Realization of a Universal Religion".

The Universalists had moved out long before, and for the next forty years or so the structure served as the Southern California home of a fundamentalist Christian denomination, the Church of the Nazarene. Yes, the same denomination as that of which I had been an adherent in Michigan as a youngster. How curious that such a narrow religious group should hold services for more than a generation in a place where such words as these had rung out: "Any attempt to bring all humanity to one method of thinking in spiritual things has been a failure and always will be a failure.... Each religion...takes up one part of the great, universal truth and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth.... All these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind.... Our watchword, then, will be acceptance and not exclusion.... I accept all the religions that were in the past and worship with them all.... I shall keep my heart open for all the religions that may come in the future."

Now the old Universalist church was at the end of its usefulness. Floors sagged. By modern standards for public buildings the auditorium was a firetrap. The structure had already been condemned as unsafe. The Church of the Nazarene had moved to a modern building of concrete and stone in a newer part of the city. A wrecking crew was scheduled to demolish the old structure.

Obtaining a key from the secretary of the new church, I entered the abandoned building through a cellar door. Pipes had broken, so that two or three inches of water stood on the floor of the basement Sunday school rooms. Ascending a narrow circular staircase that Swamiji must have used, I reached the speaker's platform. Behind was the choir loft. Before me was the semicircular auditorium with overhanging balcony. The church must have seated about eight hundred. Openings, now boarded over, showed where stained glass windows had been. The organ was gone. The pulpit had vanished. In the

dim silence I stood where Swamiji had stood, and I felt close to him. Then I went and sat down in one of the original leather-covered seats which had surely been there since the beginning. I looked at the empty rostrum; and I felt a connection with him. 'But,' I thought to myself sadly, "why couldn't I have been here in 1900 instead of now? On the other hand, except for good fortune I might have missed Swamiji entirely. How lucky to have had even this much of a relationship with him."

4.

In 1966 I came to France to live, at the Centre Védantique Ramakrichna. One was aware that Swami Vivekananda had been in Europe several times, notably in France, but one knew few details. His letters and several biographies permit us to follow his movements in a general way. But one soon realized that Swamiji's activities on the Continent had never been researched in any depth by someone on the spot.

So for the following ten years I investigated all aspects of Vivekananda's passages in France, Switzerland, Germany, Holland, and Italy, as well as his return to India in 1900 via Turkey, Greece, and Egypt. Eight illustrated articles appeared in the "Prabuddha Bharata" setting forth these findings. We now know quite a good deal about what Vivekananda did in Europe in 1895, 1896, and 1900. These findings, called Swami Vivekananda in Europe, were published as a book in Bengali in 1988.

What delightful work this was! How lucky I felt to be able to do it!

There was Swamiji's vacation trip in July, August, and September, 1896, to France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland. I was able to trace his sightseeing route and modes of transport from London across France to the splendid valley of Chamonix, at the base of Mont Blanc. Thence to Zermatt in Switzerland. It was on the heights above Zermatt, in the shadow of the Matterhorn, that Swamiji plucked the mountain flower "growing almost in the midst of eternal snow" of the Mont Rosa glacier (as he says in his letter to Swami Kripananda of August, 1896)--which flower he sent to his disciple, hoping that he might attain to a similar spiritual hardihood "amidst all the snow and ice of this earthly life."

At the nearby Alpen village of Saas-Fee Swamiji paused for two weeks "to practice hard" and seems to have passed his days there in a state of spiritual exaltation. As his letters show, Swamiji's resolve to establish what was to become Mayavati, an advaitic monastery in the Himalayas, was confirmed during this sojourn at Saas-Fee. In Saas-Fee I identified the hotel where he stayed and found the chapel of the Virgin Mary where we are told he offered mountain flowers to the Mother as a thanksgiving for having been saved from a possible fall off a cliff's edge during a walk.

In the letter to Kripananda to which I have already referred, Swamiji speaks of ashramas: "Would there was one. How would I like it and what an amount of good it would do to this country." I have responded to his wish by making an annual pilgrimage to Saas-Fee since many years and live the days I am there in my one-man ashrama (I call it Mayavati West) steadily conscious that that village is pervaded by his presence. Sometimes other devotees accompany me. Who knows but that one day there may be a second advaita ashrama at Saas-Fee.

On to Lucerne, Heidelberg, Coblenz, Cologne, Berlin, and finally Kiel, where he spent two pleasant days with the great German Sanscritist, Paul Deussen. (He had met Max Muller of Oxford, Europe's other eminent orientalist, a couple of months before.) Swamiji returned to England in late September by way of Hamburg and Amsterdam.

I identified the Parisian residence (6 Place des Etats Unis) where Swamiji stayed for some weeks as the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Francis Leggett when he visited the Exposition Universelle Internationale in 1900. This handsome mansion, presently housing the showroom of a manufacturer of crystal, is now established as a place of pilgrimage for admirers of Swamiji coming to the French capital. Swami Ritajananda held classes on the Bhagavad-Gita at 6 Place des Etats-Unis from 1968 to 1975.

I was also to find the apartment where, later that same summer, Swamiji resided as the guest of Jules Bois, in the southern part of Paris, facing the Parc de Montsouris. And indeed several other locations in Paris where he stayed or went. We see him appreciating the French capital at the height of what has been called its Belle Epoque, meeting notable personalities of the day, studying French culture, admiring the country's intellectual accomplishments, learning to speak and write tolerably well the French language.

I studied the Congress of the History of Religions at which Swamiji spoke in September of 1900 and was able to add to our knowledge of that event and of what he said in the sole public talk he ever gave on the Continent.

That summer Swamiji vacationed on the Brittany coast and visited the ancient Christian shrine of Mont Saint Michel. We now know with some precision the dates and circumstances of his two trips to Lannion and Perros Guirec.

Swamiji made the acquaintance of a famous cleric of the period, P•re Hyacinthe Loyson, who had broken with the Catholic Church over the question of the infallibility of the Pope. Through establishing an acquaintance with Loyson's granddaughter (the P•re left his Order and married) I was able to attain access to the journals of Loyson, in which are found entries referring to previously unknown doings and sayings of Swamiji during the period of their acquaintance.

The internationally renowned opera singer, Mme. Emma CalvŽ, was another of Swamiji's friends. At Millau, in the south of France, where Mme. CalvŽ lived the last days of her life and is buried, I was led to discover the singer's travel notes and personal papers, in which one finds many references to Vivekananda, heretofore unknown. These help us to appreciate the breath of Swamiji's knowledge and how compassionate his heart was for this celebrated but troubled woman. A previously unknown letter from him to her, commiserating her on the death of her father, written only a few days before his own death, was brought to light and has been published.

After a three-months' stay in France, Swamiji left Europe forever by way of Munich, Constantinople, Athens, and Cairo. I was able to trace this voyage in detail and identify the auditorium near Constantinople where he gave a clandestine talk on the Vedanta in a Christian missionary college--

clandestine because of the opposition of the ruling Turks. Then to see the Parthenon, the Great Pyramid, the inscrutable Sphinx, and good-bye forever to our part of the world, perhaps, I have often imagined, with a touch of regret. Swamiji loved the Occident, felt at home with occidentals, and was, I believe we may say--and that makes him so understanding of us--at least half occidental himself: or if you will, entirely universal.

Going to places where he was and imagining him there may not be a great form of sadhana, but it's not nothing. The more connections we can make with the Divine the better.

5.

In coming to the Centre VĹdantique in 1966 I had the good fortune to become a close friend of an outstanding French woman who, although she had never met Vivekananda, was an ardent admirer of him and who did everything she could to advance his cause: Mme. Drinette Verdier. Her love for Swami Vivekananda and her faith in him were a wonderment for all who knew her. She provided several more links with Swamiji.

Mme. Verdier was approaching eighty when I met her. Some forty years before she had sought to deepen her knowledge of Vivekananda by cultivating the acquaintance of Mme. CalvĹ and of Miss MacLeod. From Mme. CalvĹ she obtained and preserved several reminiscences concerning Swamiji which she related to others and to me and which have now passed into the literature concerning Swamiji. From Miss MacLeod Mme. Verdier obtained souvenirs of Vivekananda. And at the end of her life Miss MacLeod gave to Drinette the pendant the famous Parisian jeweler RenĹ Lalique had made--which was at once a beautiful jewel and a small reliquary containing some bits of Swamiji's hair. All photographs of Tantine taken in her latter years show her wearing this pendant. The pendant was Mme. Verdier's most precious possession, and to her both a link with her great hero and a talisman offering protection to a solitary and aging woman.

Sensing she was soon to die, and wanting to be certain that this valuable relic should be left in good hands, Mme. Verdier invited Swami Ritajananda and me, together with Swami Swahananda, who was visiting France at that moment, to her apartment. There in her accustomed gracious manner, although almost too ill to sit upright, Mme. Verdier presided over a high tea in our honor. As we finished, she took off the pendant and placed it in the hands of Swami Ritajananda. This was on 9 August, 1972. She died on October 24. The pendant is now preserved at Belur Math.

It was Mme. Verdier's driving ambition that the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda should be published in French. So in the latter 1930's she sought out M. Jean Herbert, who was a friend of Miss MacLeod and of Swami Siddheswarananda, and who had already brought out some of the works of Vivekananda in French, and commissioned him at her own expence to make the necessary translations--a heavy task which required several years of work by Herbert and a staff of assistants. As a result, the French-speaking public has been given access to lectures, letters, and writings of Swamiji to which it had no access before. I often think that Mme. Verdier (and she would have liked nothing better) was

Swamiji's "invention" by which he was to make his message known in the France he admired so much, in the language he worked so hard to master.

6.

Long ago Swami Prabhavananda had somehow come into possession of one of Swami Vivekananda's visiting cards. It was a simple oblong of pasteboard with Swamiji's name engraved on it, inscribed in Swamiji's handwriting: "With my love and blessings" or some such message, followed by his signature. Swami Prabhavananda kept this card always with him, inside his wallet. Once he took it out and showed it to me; and when I felicitated him enviously on his good fortune in possessing such a relic, he remarked: "Yes, it is curious. Although I am the disciple of Swami Brahmananda, I have always been unusually favored by Swamiji." (He was no doubt thinking of his close relations with Sister, Ujjvala, and Miss MacLeod, all former associates of Swami Vivekananda, and what they had contributed to the success of his life and work.)

Now I can say something similar. I feel as though Swamiji afforded me a kind of "special status" too. All the living connections I have enjoyed, and the opportunities I have had to go to places associated with him, have kept my mind centered on him. Permitting me to have these experiences was his way of showing me exceptional grace.

And he has actually accorded to me for safekeeping until my own death--when they shall go to the Order's archives--two relics of exceptional interest: the original of the telegram he sent on August 3, 1900, from le Havre, announcing to the Leggetts his arrival that day in Paris. This was given to me by Mrs. Frances Leggett, daughter of Swamiji's Paris hosts. Secondly, a letter in Swamiji's own hand, offered by M. Jean Herbert a few weeks before his own death on August 21, 1980. It is not an important letter and the text has been published in the Complete Works, but it is one more link with Swamiji.

No doubt the historical research and writing which I have done concerning Swami Vivekananda are important. Leaving what records I have established--guideposts along a future pilgrim route--is the "fortune" I pass on to those who will follow. Happily, Marie Louise Burke (Gargi) has relied on many of these findings in producing her extraordinary six-volume work Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries.

But for me the central point is that during these years, many, many of my waking hours were taken up in thinking of a superior being. I have never been a great meditator, nor have I cared much for ritualism. I am not an ascetic. I cannot pretend to have pursued a life of enormous austerity. The only virtue I can claim is that I have become--as was the case of these several other western individuals I have mentioned and who inspired me--a Vivekananda enthusiast. I even have to catch myself sometimes when signing my name, which also commences with "V", so as not to append his signature to letters and checks instead of my own!

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Seven

The Devotee as Admirer of Sri Ramakrishna.

1.

When I was in Kamarpukur in 1953 it was only for part of a day. At that time it was difficult to get to Sri Ramakrishna's birthplace and not very convenient to stay there. Approach was by bullock cart or jeep over rutted trails and an unbridged river, from the nearest train stop at Bishnupur, thirty miles distant. Although there was a Ramakrishna Math at Kamarpukur, there were as yet few arrangements for pilgrims; furthermore, for much of the year the village was considered possibly unhealthy. I had only a hurried glance at the principal sites connected with Gadadhar's advent and youth.

Yet the few hours I spent in Kamarpukur sustained me in the years that followed. Half a world away in America I could recall what I had seen and take nourishment from it. The mature Ramakrishna, teaching in Calcutta, drew much inspiration from his youthful experiences. Many of the parables and illustrations with which he vivified his message came from the sights of his childhood. My visit to Kamarpukur helped me make a small start toward learning to know and love the Master.

Precious and sustaining as were these memories, the glimpse I had was far too brief. I yearned to go back to Kamarpukur again, to stay a much longer time. I would linger in its streets and watch the life of the people. I would walk outside among the fields. I would spend time in places where the Master had been. Perhaps I could absorb something; perhaps love and knowledge would grow. And this wish was granted. In November of 1963 I was vouchsafed an unhurried view of Kamarpukur. I lived in Ramakrishna's village for a wonderful twenty days.

Today it is easy to get to Kamarpukur. The man who during his lifetime was appreciated by very few has become one of India's favorite saints. The Order established in his name is today the country's leading religious society. Now good roads connect the Master's village with the outside world, and bus services to Kamarpukur are frequent. Reliable year-round accommodations for pilgrims are in good supply. Perhaps it would be nice to have been able to place a glass case over the Kamarpukur of one hundred or even ten years ago to preserve it as it was. But this was not to be. Kamarpukur is growing modern. It is on its way to becoming a bustling town. Fortunately, the most important spots connected with Gadadhar's childhood have come under the jurisdiction of the Ramakrishna Order. They are well maintained and on view, for the edification of the Master's growing body of devotees.

2.

By walking around the streets of Kamarpukur today one can easily gain an idea of the manner in which his family must have lived when Ramakrishna was a boy.

Although clustered together to form a village, the dwellings are really farmhouses. Each forms a private domain, self-contained and largely self-sufficient. A courtyard formed by the house, by the stables and other outbuildings, and by high walls, provides a large central quarter open to light and air, but closed to intruders. A quarter useful for many purposes: for drying and husking paddy, for storing fodder, for sunning clothing, for milking the cow. Here the baby safely can learn to crawl or walk, in sight of his mother. A covered veranda running along the courtyard side of the house furnishes a cool place for cooking, for taking meals, and for sleeping on hot nights. A door from the courtyard leads to a nearby tank. In its waters the housewife can wash the family's clothes and cooking utensils; the members of the family may conveniently go to the tank for the daily bath.

This kind of house can be built by the householder himself. The floors and walls are of earth, and the roof is thatched with layers of paddy straw, placed over rafters of bamboo. A house of this kind, if it is well built and suitably maintained, is attractive, clean, and durable.

It is to this sort of residence--the cottage of Khudiram Chatterjee, that the pilgrim in Kamarpukur first makes his way. He will see an earthen house of modest size. In the open quarter behind the residence originally stood two other structures: a shrine built of earth which housed the family deities; and a bamboo shed containing household implements. It was the custom in Bengal for women to go to some place away from the house to bear their children; and it was to this shed that Chandra made her way on February 18, 1836, to give birth to the boy who was to be named Gadadhar.

The house, consisting of three rooms, remains much as it was in Ramakrishna's time. But the earthen shrine and the shed have vanished. Where the former stood there is a new shrine constructed of brick and marble. And the shed has been replaced by a well-built stone temple of considerable size. A marble altar on which sits a marble statue of Sri Ramakrishna rests on the very spot where Ramakrishna was born.

The shrine and temple give the appearance of crowding the house, and indeed they do. But the devotee does not object to this, for it reminds him of his Lord's modest antecedents. Apparently Khudiram's compound simply was not large enough to permit the buildings to be placed any farther apart.

Surrounding Ramakrishna's birthplace are the buildings of the Ramakrishna Math, whose monks protect and maintain these precious relics.

"A mother keeps on cooking while the baby is in bed sucking his toy. But when it throws the toy away and cries for her, she puts down the rice pot and takes the baby in her arms and nurses it." The visitor to Kamarpukur will at once recognize the setting for this saying of Sri Ramakrishna. An open door into a courtyard reveals the scene. From the rafters of the veranda hangs a wooden cradle. It swings in the light breeze. Inside, the baby lies, contented. At a little distance the mother squats in front of a brass vessel set on a firepot formed of mud. She is busy, but she will turn to the child if it calls for her. "It is said that if a man can weep for God one day and one night, he sees Him."

The courtyard contains many things over which a baby might fall: farm tools, piles of firewood, a stone tablet for grinding spices. "But one need not fear anything if one has received the grace of God. It is rather easy for a child to stumble if he holds the father's hand, but there can be no such fear if the father holds the child's hand."

The tank Khudiram's family used was the Haldarpukur, some two hundred feet to the north of their house. That this is an excavated pond is made clear by the embankments of earth around its edges; but because of its generous size Haldarpukur gives the impression of being a small natural lake. Palm trees rise from the high ground surrounding it.

"God has covered all with His maya. He doesn't let us know anything. He who puts maya aside to see God can see Him. Once, when I was explaining God's actions to someone, God suddenly showed me the lake at Kamarpukur. I saw a man removing the green scum and drinking the water. The water was as clear as crystal."

Three or four ghats are on a lake. "The hindus, who drink water at one place, call it 'jal'. The musulmans at another place call it 'pani'. And the English at a third place call it 'water'. The Reality is one and the same; the difference is in name."

Haldarpukur is only one of many tanks in Kamarpukur. At the edge of a certain tank we see a woman scouring cooking vessels with wood ashes and rinsing them in the water. "And one must always chant the name and glories of God every day and pray to Him. An old metal pot must be scrubbed every day."

Trees bend low over the tank; at one corner there is a patch of lotus plants. A man sits on the bank holding a rod. We see him watching the bobbin intently. He is unaware of our presence, like the fisherman in Ramakrishna's parable who failed to hear a whole conversation directed to him by a passing friend. "A person can achieve such single-mindedness in meditation that he will see nothing, hear nothing."

"Finish the few duties you have at hand, and then you will have peace. When the mistress of the house goes to bathe after finishing her cooking and other household duties, she won't come back however you may shout after her."

Just to the east of Khudiram's house there is a big old mango tree. The seed, we are told, came from the village of Bhursubo, about a mile from Kamarpukur. Here lived, in Gadadhar's time, a man known as Manik Raja. Manik was rich, virtuous, and humanitarian. He loved Gadadhar and arranged for the child to come and visit him frequently. The ruins of Manik Raja's house can be seen today standing out among the mud huts of Bhursubo: frescoed ceilings faded and sagging, carved pillars now supporting no second floor, a sculptured entrance gate all grown up with creepers and trees. It is said that on one occasion Gadadhar enjoyed at Manik Raja's house a mango so delicious that he brought the seed home and planted it in his own yard. And there the tree is today, still giving in the season delicious fruit in plentiful quantity. "The mango grows and ripens on account of the covering skin. You throw away the skin when

the mango is fully ripe and ready to be eaten. It is possible for a man to attain gradually the knowledge of Brahman because of the covering skin of maya. Maya in its aspects of vidya and avidya may be likened to the skin of the mango. Both are necessary."

Across the road from Khudiram's house, not more than a few paces away, stands the Jugis' Shiva temple. It is square, less than twelve feet on a side, perhaps twenty-five feet in height. It is made of masonry, the line of the roof simulating the drooping eaves of a Bengal cottage. The back and the sides are plain. The front is inlaid with red clay tiles depicting religious figures and mythological scenes. The only opening is a small narrow door, revealing a black stone linga within.

To look at this shrine today is to see a familiar kind of small Bengali temple, not in the least unusual except that it is better maintained than many. But the visitor cannot pass it without remembering the remarkable event which occurred there the year before Gadadhar was born. Chandra was standing in front of this temple when she felt a rush of light pour from the linga and enter her body. As a result, she felt that she was pregnant, and in due course Gadadhar was born.

3.

Although bicycle rickshaws ploy the lanes of Kamarpukur today and there is a new cinema at the edge of the village on the Puri road, a walk through Gadadhar's town is still an excursion into the past. The visitor will first come upon the old buildings of the Lala estate, just to the south of Khudiram's house. A temple, a prayer hall, and a pavilion (used as the village school) still remain, although dilapidated. Trees grow inside some of the ancient rooms. "Chaitanya said, 'The name of God has very great sanctity. It may not produce an immediate result, but one day it must bear fruit. It is like a seed that has been left on the cornice of a building. After many days the house crumbles, and the seed falls to the earth, germinates, and at last bears fruit!'"

The Lahas were close friends of Khudiram, Chandra, and their children. Prasannamayi Laha, together with the blacksmith woman Dhani, assisted at Gadadhar's birth. Gayavishnu Laha was Gadadhar's bosom friend. On the occasion of Gadadhar's sacred thread ceremony, it was mainly with the help of Dharmadas Laha that Khudiram was able to entertain the people of the entire village. "At a feast...one at first hears much noise of talking. When the guests sit on the floor with leaf plates in front of them much of the noise ceases. Then one hears only the cry, 'Bring some luchi!' As they partake of the luchis and other dishes, three quarters of the noise subsides. When the curd, the last course, appears, one hears only the sound 'soop, soop' as the guests eat the curd with their fingers. Then there is practically no noise. Afterwards all retire to sleep, and absolute silence reigns. Therefore I say, at the beginning of religious life a man makes much ado about work, but as his mind dives deeper into God, he becomes less active. Last of all comes renunciation of work, followed by samadhi."

In the house of the Lahas occurred the shraddha ceremony during which Gadadhar solved, with a sentence or two, a philosophical point over which the pandits had been arguing for hours. The Laha residence, dilapidated beyond salvage, was demolished in 1953 and its site incorporated into the grounds

of the Ramakrishna Math. The open-air stall, where the monks of the ashrama take their breakfast and four-o'clock tea, is located in what was previously a side yard of the Laha mansion.

Durgadas Pyne's residence was a few steps farther south. No trace of it remains today. It will be remembered that Durgadas was a stout advocate of the *pourdah* system, who boasted that no male outsider had ever seen or could ever see the women of his household or the rooms in which they lived. The story of how Gadadhar reproved Durgadas is well known. Lingering in the paths between the tanks and cottages in the quarter where the house of Durgadas had been, I tried to visualize the teen-age Gadadhar arriving at Durgadas's gate, dressed as a lowly woman who had been left behind, after the close of the market, by her friends. I saw him gaining permission from Durgadas to take shelter for the night at his house, then going inside to gossip with the Pyne women until interrupted by calls from his brother, who had been sent out to search for him. I saw the chagrin on the face of the master of the house as the young man, throwing off his disguise, bounded out of the house to join his brother and start home.

Sitanath Pyne's residence and Vishnu temple were and are in the same locality. The present occupants of the house were kind enough to let me go all through the building, upstairs and down. The temple too still stands, although most of its upper part has collapsed, and the deity has been removed. A platform facing the temple was the stage on which Gadadhar appeared in the role of Shiva when he was about ten years old--or more properly, where he attempted to enact the part. He was prevented by an ecstasy which rendered him outwardly unconscious. Of this platform there is no trace; its probable position is now taken up by the yard of a small hut.

Except for the market place on down the main street, Kamarpukur has no public square other than the small open area in front of the Laha school. In my walks around Gadadhar's village I passed this place every day. It is used by the children of the neighborhood as a playground. The old school, which Gadadhar attended, is merely an open-air shed, or *natmandir*, with a dirt floor and with wooden posts holding up what must have originally been a roof of rice thatch, presently of corrugated tin. Kamarpukur now has an up-to-date brick school managed by the Ramakrishna Mission. The old school is not in use.

I made friends with the children and once treated them to *jilibis*. For at least five generations the *jilibis* of Kamarpukur have been considered among the best in Bengal. Gadadhar greatly liked this most delicious sweetmeat, joking as a mature man later in Dakshineswar when someone brought him an offering of *jilibis*: "You see, I chant the name of the Divine Mother; so I get good things to eat."

On Kali Puja afternoon three or four of the children invited me to their home to see an image of Kali which they had made and which was to be worshiped that night. It was well modeled and realistically colored. Seeing the image reminded me of Ramakrishna's statement that he had never been very good in school; it seemed to him he was being taught only what would attach a person to the world. But as a youngster he could model gods and goddesses very well.

In his Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master Swami Saradananda speaks of the youthful Gadadhar's enormous popularity in Kamarpukur. He was very gay and charming and most lovable; Ramakrishna

himself referred to the boy he had been as a "happy pigeon." He was on very personal terms with everyone--boys, girls, men, women. The Bengali he spoke and the illustrations he used show how intimately he knew the people of the community. Yet Gadadhar aroused spiritual emotions in many who knew him. Swami Saradananda mentions several people--among them Manik Raja, Prasannamayi Laha, and an artisan named Srinivas--who regarded Gadadhar as possessing a divine personality even as a carefree boy playing among the lanes and tanks of Kamarpukur.

Upon asking the children in the playground what their names were, I found that in many cases it was Laha or Pyne. My heart gave a leap. These noisy little tykes were descendants of the playmates and friends of Gadadhar!

I met, also, the descendants of the family of Ramakrishna. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Gadadhar's brother Rameswar live in Kamarpukur to this day. One of them is Kanai Ghosal, who serves as daily worshiper of the family deities in the shrine behind Khudiram's house. Kanai has a young brother of ten, named Swapan Ghosal. I had wondered whether there could be any youngster in Kamarpukur today in the least resembling what Gadadhar might have been like in 1845 or 1850. It was suggested that Swapan might have a slightly similar appearance. I took a number of photographs of Swapan dressed as Gadadhar might have dressed twelve decades before, in dhoti and chadar, standing on the streets of Kamarpukur and in front of Haldarpukur. Swapan is a fine boy, bright-faced, intelligent, and gentle, but how could anyone hope to resemble the magical Gadadhar?

One day the children assembled in the old school so that I could take their picture. The entire court, but no king; the full cast, devoid of the leading player. I could only think, with regret, of what Sri Ramakrishna himself cried when he was in Krishna's boyhood town of Vrindaban: "O Krishna! Everything here is as it was in the olden days. You alone are absent "

4.

The visitor to Kanarpukur will wish to see other places connected with the early life of the Master. He will visit the site of Dhani's house, the Gopeswar and Mukundapur Shiva temples, and the Bhutir-Khal and Budhui-Moral cremation grounds. He will walk along the Puri road, a quarter of a mile east of Kamarpukur, remembering how Gadadhar used to go to the public pilgrim shelter there to associate with wandering sadhus.

If he does not wish to pause long anywhere, the visitor can make the circuit of these places in an hour or two. Dhani's house has been replaced by a small modern temple. The Gopeswar and Mukundapur temples are venerated today because it was to these shrines that Chandra went to pray for the welfare of her son, when it was reported from Dakshineswar that the young temple priest there was mad; at Mukundapur Chandra received assurance that Gadadhar was not sick; her son was under the sway of an extraordinary spiritual power. Both of these temples are still in use, but are in poor stages of repair. The cremation grounds were once thickets, forbidding and eerie. Sitting at one or the other in the dead of night, the youthful Gadadhar meditated on the vanities of the world. Both the cremation grounds have

been cleared and now resemble small fields. The young men of Kamarpukur play soccer and other games there. Bhutir-khal is just west of Ramakrishna's house and is shaded by the same old banyan tree which shaded Gadadhar. The Budhui-Moral is on the northeastern edge of the village. Both are still used for cremations. As for the resthouse on the Puri road, not a trace remains, and two different places are pointed out as locations where it might have stood.

Lastly the pilgrim will want to see the mango grove where Gadadhar and his companions had good times as boys, organizing and rehearsing religious dramas--and, it is assumed, feasting on mangoes. This orchard was west of the village, halfway between Kamarpukur and Bhursubo, on the road to Jayrambati. The grove was planted and donated for public use by Manik Raja. The place is now a rice field; only five trees remain. It is bounded on one side by a new state college having an enrollment of over four hundred students. But even if the site of Manik's orchard were to be forgotten or otherwise lost to view, it has been preserved forever through these words: "The aim of human life is to attain bhakti. I have come to the garden to eat mangoes. What is the use of my calculating the number of trees, branches, or leaves? I only eat the mangoes; I don't need to know the number of trees and leaves."

Almost every day I walked or cycled out in the country, among the farms and hamlets surrounding Kamarpukur. Living reminders of the Master's teachings greeted me on every side. Standing in paddy fields stretching yellow-green to palm-shaded tanks or clusters of houses, I remembered that Ramakrishna said; "I go into an ecstatic mood when I stand in a big meadow." I recalled how he compared single-minded devotion to a tree "shooting straight up."

Seeing the shepherd children leading animals out to graze, I thought of the reassuring words: "God is fond of his devotees. He runs after the devotee as the cow after the calf." And this invitation: "In every age He descends to earth, in human form, as an Incarnation to teach people love and devotion. The milk comes through the udder of the cow. The Incarnation is the udder."

Paddy fields must be flodded with water during the planting and growing season. Looking over the undulating land, I could see that the fields followed the courses of waterways; rising ground was generally given over to sparse grass where goats or cows grazed. "By being lowly one can rise high. Cultivation is not possible on high land; in low land water accumulates and makes cultivation possible."

Everywhere the land bloomed under the strong sun: millions upon millions of growing things, reaching upward. "There is a great power in the seed of God's name. It destroys ignorance. A seed is tender, and the sprout soft; still it pierces the hard ground. The ground breaks and makes way for the sprout."

I hear a creaking of wood and a soft clanging of bells. A heavy bullock cart lumbers down the road. An old man sits in the back of the wagon. A boy straddles the shaft, guiding the oxen with a stick. A young man, wrapped in a mantle, walks behind, to give the cart guidance from the rear when necessary. All three have the same hard bodies, the same strong faces, the same distant look in the eye: three generations of one family. "Sometimes it happens that, discriminating between the Real and the unreal, a man loses his faith in the existence of God. But a devotee who sincerely yearns for God does not give up

his meditation even though he is invaded by atheistic ideas. A man whose father and grandfather have been farmers continues his farming even though he doesn't get any crop in a year of drought."

Near at hand I see a farmer hard at work. What is he doing? He is standing in a stream of water, operating some sort of implement which looks like a narrow canoe, open at one end. As I draw closer I see that he is raising water from the stream to the land above. The water-lift is pivoted, and weighted on the higher, open end. By lowering his end of the lift, the farmer can let in a quantity of water. As he raises the lift, the water flows out the open end into a channel, to run along an earthen trough to a distant field. Here is the inspiration for Ramakrishna's parable of the determined farmer, who, seeing that the seasonal rains have been delayed and his crops were drying up, persevered until he had irrigated his land. From sunup he worked. He could not take his bath: he would not eat his dinner; he would not take any midday rest. Angrily he drove away his wife and children, when they came to urge moderation. Through a whole day's back-breaking labor the farmer toiled, managing only by evening to irrigate his field. Then "his mind was filled with peace and joy. As without determination the farmer cannot bring water to his field, so also without intense yearning a man cannot realize God.'

5.

Yet the more I saw of Kamarpukur and its environs, and the longer I stayed there, the more that I felt that Sri Ramakrishna was most fully present and his message available in the life of the Math. Here he does not have to be sought within crumbling relics or among the shadows of times long past. At the Math the Master is steadily regarded as the darling youngster of Kamarpukur, as the sage of Dakshineswar, as friend, beloved, and God--ever present, ever visible. Every event of the Math rotates around the fact of his actuality; every move of each of its members confirms and reinforces the truth of his living presence.

In the daily worship of the family deities the spiritual traditions of Ramakrishna's family are respected and continued. In the shrine behind Khudiram's house, on cushions placed upon miniature brass thrones, reside the images of Rameswar and Raghuvir. Sitala sits on a wooden platform adjacent to them. These deities were installed and worshiped by Khudiram; and in the years following his sacred thread ceremony, until the time when he moved to Calcutta, they were worshiped by Gadadhar. The priestly duties of the family shrine are now carried on, as I have said, by Kanai Ghosal, whose grandfather on his mother's side was Shivaram Chatterjee, the second son of Ramakrishna's brother Rameswar. Kanai was thirty-four years old when I met him in 1963, was married, and had three children. He is quiet and pleasant. Some see in his features a slight resemblance to Ramakrishna. I had been told to take the dust of Kanai's feet when meeting him--the family of the guru should be given the same respect as the guru--and I did.

When one looks at these images, except for their age and associations, one can see nothing extraordinary in them. Sitala is a red earthenware pot about half a foot in height, filled with water, and with mango leaves and a green coconut placed on top. Rameswar is a Shiva linga perhaps three inches tall, brought back by Khudiram from the Rameswaram temple in south India, where he went on pilgrimage in 1824.

And Raghuvir is the shalagrama stone, hardly more than an inch in diameter, which Khudiram found--the miraculous story of his finding it in a field near Kamarpukur is well known--and installed in about 1815.

Yet Khudiram believed in these emblems. He regarded Sitala as an awakened deity; that is, the living presence of the goddess is there and responds actively to the worship addressed to her. Khudiram had many visions of Sitala. In the morning as he walked about picking flowers for her worship, he often saw her going along with him as a little girl, sometimes assisting him by bending down the flowery branches.

As for Raghuvir, Khudiram had absolute faith that the Power represented in this small stone would sustain him and his family and see them through all difficulties. He relied on Raghuvir as patron and provider. So did his wife Chandra. So did Gadadhar, who said many years later: "When my father chanted the name of Raghuvir his chest would turn red. This also happened to me." Although I cannot comprehend the symbology of the shalagrama--or of the earthen pot or the linga either--how can I question what was regarded as divine by such knowers of God as these?

Every night after the evening worship Kanai Ghosal would come to my room. Without any advance sound, the door would be swung open. There Kanai would stand, holding a tray of luchis--prasad from Raghuvir's supper; that is, from the evening food offering in the family shrine. Smiling, without saying anything because he does not know English, Kanai would place a luchi in my hand and quietly leave. I experienced the strangest feeling of faith. Raghuvir was providing for the residents of Khudiram's homestead today. For me, too, for am I not also a part of Khudiram's family?

Sri Ramakrishna, equally, in his temple, a few feet away from the family deities, is worshiped daily by the monks of the Math. He is treated as the honored personage of the place; and in so treating him, he is always regarded as alive and present. One would no more pass in front of his image without bowing than one would cross the path of a king without giving some sign of obeisance. One enters his presence only when wearing clean clothing and after removing one's shoes. Near him one is quiet and respectful.

Ramakrishna is symbolically awakened in the morning. He is offered dishes he likes to eat at various times throughout the day. An elaborate ritual is performed each morning, during which every possible mark of veneration is made. In the evening, just as the coconut palms and amalki trees to the west are becoming black silhouettes against the red sky, arati is done. This is a vesper service of song and praise, conducted by the monks, and joined by people of the town and the pilgrims who happen to be present--numbering from a dozen to a hundred. After that the Master is symbolically put to bed for the night in his old bedroom in his father's house just behind the temple.

And that is not a one-sided relationship. Sri Ramakrishna responds to the devotion of those who love him. "I cherished one desire. I said to the Mother, 'O Mother, I shall be king of the devotees.'" "At the time of the evening service I used to cry out from the roof of the kuthi, weeping: 'Oh, where are you all? Come to me.' You see, they are all gathering, one by one." "He who has sincerely called on God or performed his daily religious devotions will surely come here." "Sometimes God acts as the magnet and

the the devotees as the needle. God attracts the devotees to himself. Again, sometimes the devotee is the magnet and God is the needle. Such is the attraction of the devotee that God comes to him, unable to resist his love."

6.

It is November 30, 1963. Tonight there is a full moon. My three weeks in Kamarpukur are just about over. From the door of my room I can see Khudiram's house and Ramakrishna's temple lying still in the cool white light. I feel sad to be leaving. First, only a few hours in Kamarpukur. Then three weeks. But even that is not enough. Would a whole lifetime be enough? It is so easy to think of him here.

Then I remember something that he said, and I see how to surmount the difficulty. Each one of us can have one's own Kamarpukur, from which one need never be separated. One may, if one wishes, establish a Birthplace within: "The heart of the devotee is the abode of God. He dwells, no doubt, in all beings, but he especially manifests himself in the heart of the devotee. A landlord may at one time or another visit all parts of his estate, but people say he is generally to be found in a particular drawing-room. The heart of the devotee is the drawing room of God."

7.

I have earlier in this book spoken of Sri Ramakrishna as an avatar--as an Incarnation of God appropriate to our age. I should like now to devote the remainder of this chapter to Sri Ramakrishna and my feelings concerning him. To write about him as an avatar is of course an undertaking impossible to carry out adequately, for the magnitude of the Incarnation is far beyond any man's comprehension, and his qualities beyond any writer's power to evaluate or describe. Scholars and devotees are still writing books about Jesus, who lived two thousand years ago and has already been the subject of countless treatises; the subject has not been exhausted yet.

The Incarnation is described as the Re-establisher of Religion, the Vindicator of the Pious, the Re-institutor of Dharma, the Incorporation of all Knowledge, the Supreme Creator, the Primordial Teacher, the Manipulator of all Power, the Sanctuary, and ever so much more. Yes, even a cow's udder! As Ramakrishna said, "God's Incarnation as a man cannot be explained by analogy. One must feel it for oneself and realize it by direct perception. An analogy can give us only a little glimpse. By touching the horns, legs, or tail of a cow we in fact touch the cow herself; but for us the essential thing about a cow is her milk, which comes through the udder. The Divine Incarnation is like the udder. God incarnates Himself as man from time to time in order to teach people devotion and divine love.'

These are grand subjects. But all beyond my power to handle adequately. Thus in these pages I shall try to present Ramakrishna as I have learned to admire him, in explaining my own personal attitude toward him and what he means to me. Serving up the milk is beyond my talent; but perhaps I can describe not too badly the horns and legs and tail!

First of all, there is the fact that the incarnation for this age, the originator of modern history, was born in Bengal. Bengal? For goodness's sakes, why? An immediate answer is, because Bengal is in India. We could make a joke and say that after having had a poor experience in being born in Israel, God reverted to his old habit of taking birth in Bharat. And there is something to that. India has been for centuries and still is a great plantation of religions.

There existed in India for an investigator like Ramakrishna the freedom necessary and all the facilities required to carry on his research. In India and in India only the message of the Vedas was a living reality. The realizations of the the rishis were current knowledge. The influences of Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Shankara were still strong. Shiva and Kali were everyday realities. The many approaches to God--from the severe nondualism of Shankara to the melting devotion of Sri Chaitanya--and all gradations in between--were in current practice. Even extreme disciplines like Tantra were accepted.

In addition, India possessed a large and powerful minority of Musulmans, practicing their religion of Mohamed, very visible for examination.

And finally, Bengal in 1836 was the home state of the capital of India, at Calcutta. New Delhi became the headquarters of the government only in 1912. And to Calcutta had come many western influences, Christianity for one, with all its proselitizing enthusiasm. Western science was another, with all the effect that it was to have on the world, and which seemed capable of setting aside forever traditional religious values.

Whereas the Incarnation is essentially God, he also shares man's fate in being to some extent a product, and eventually a critic, of his environment. And what a propitious environment to be born into for one who was to become the new world teacher! Everything was there in Bengal, at his disposal, everything best--and worst--from East and the West. And as we know, Ramakrishna acquainted himself with it all and could thus speak to all.

Then too, coincident with Ramakrishna's appearance Bengal was the center of the Indian intellectual renaissance which would eventually lead to India's independence. Anything that happened in Bengal affected all the rest of India.

And was there a good reason why Ramakrishna should have chosen to appear in the nineteenth century?

Yes, he "had" to be born then. The nineteenth century marked a turning point in the history of the whole world. Everything was becoming secularized. The Age of the Enlightenment had in effect vanquished religion and replaced it with science. Earthly prosperity and progress became dominant themes. Life is real, life is earnest, and hard work can bring rewards here and now. The religion of hard work and organization can bring a secular paradise. The awesome power of Great Britain in the nineteenth century seemed to justify this philosophy. The justice of territorial and economic colonialism was not to be

doubted, for did any other nation possess an equally high standard of living? It is amusing to note how briefly this eminence lasted. The white man was not only forced to relinquish his colonies; but what domination remains at the present day is threatened by the Arab's possession of oil, the blacks' mere possession of large numbers, and the nations of the Far East's enterprise. Aside from pursuing a murderous war which he could easily lose, western man can do nothing about the decline of his domination.

A second characteristic of the nineteenth century is that at this time provincialism began to weaken. Everything became internationalized. Thus the ignorance of others' ideas which had characterized the world up to that time and made fanaticism viable, began to disappear. This was to prepare the way--or so it would seem--for the vast reconciliation of diverse religious viewpoints Ramakrishna was to precipitate.

Into this scene of this-worldliness and modernity glided Sri Ramakrishna. Why was he subject to such frequent samadhis? To underline the importance of the eternal. The masters said that time is money. Ramakrishna said that both time and money were of secondary importance. Why did he dress so carelessly? To show that appearance, the foundation-stone of the English virtue of gentlemanliness, is not of much moment. Why did he urge his disciples to sing and dance? To show his contempt for religion of the head and of mere respectability. He admonished Pratap Chandra Mazumdar for his too conscientious dedication to work: "What can you do to help the world? It is God's world, and he is capable of looking after it. Devote yourself to God." The hippies were to make something like this their own idea a hundred years later. And the growing revolt of factory workers against production-line drudgery cries out against heartless efficiency. It is difficult in 1991 to find anybody anywhere who feels he possesses the whole truth. Like it or not, this may well prove to be the trend of the future: a love of leisureliness and a dedication to acceptance.

9.

Why did Sri Ramakrishna choose to be born a brahmin? Well, in India one had to be born in one caste or another. In India in 1836 when the concept of caste was still strong it was appropriate for one who was to become a teacher to be born a brahmin. It is the caste of priests and teachers, which Ramakrishna went on to become, and as a brahmin he could mingle freely with other brahmins and members of all other castes. His brahmin background gave him a sort of inherent authority and credibility in others' eyes. Whereas democratic-minded, no doubt, God is also practical. Christ, too, as a direct descendant of David, was born into an elevated class. But Ramakrishna took birth in a family of poor brahmins, very pious but poor, whose profession was agriculture--just as Jesus was destined by family background to take up the trade of carpenter.

That was necessary for the master. But what about his disciples? It was quite natural that the exponent of his message should have been of the warrior caste--like St. Paul--and the characteristics of this class Vivekananda manifested all his life: fearlessness and vigor. He spoke of himself as descended from Mogul conquerors. Ramakrishna's spiritual son, Swami Brahmananda, who was to perform as chief

abbot of the early monastic effort, also was of the warrior caste, thus certifying Ramakrishna's approval of a religion in which karma yoga was to have an accepted place.

Was there some reason why Ramakrishna was brought up in a rural environment, speaking the unvarnished language of a rustic? As the early sections of this chapter have made clear, even today Kamarpukur is little more than a hamlet lost in the midst of rice fields, where the inhabitants speak a local dialect.

I like to think the reason is that Ramakrishna was an environmentalist long before pollution was to become a world problem. Perhaps this is putting it a little strongly. It is rather that he realized that man is born of the earth, and is sustained by the earth's natural functions: its rains, its periods of harvest, its plants and animals. When man gets too far away from the soil he suffers. Witness the psychological disorders associated with today's living in great cities, in high-rise buildings. Ashramas--as I argue in Chapter Nine--become necessary, designed to counteract this effect. Ramakrishna loved the earth, respected natural rhythms, and always stayed close to the soil. His teachings are made understandable by the inclusion of many parables drawn from nature. I showed this by compiling a little book of photographs illustrating the natural scenes in Bengal which gave rise to the explanations he used in order to make clear his doctrines. I have done the same via the written word in earlier sections of this chapter. The simplicity of such parables, their earthiness, make them easily graspable universally, by all mankind, whether one is Indian, Chinese, African, American. Allusions from the earth provide a kind of Esperanto, a world language, in which all can communicate.

The farm boy patois added a genuineness, a charm, that touched the hearts of his hearers and today touches the hearts of the sophisticated city dweller, the hungry intellectual. It lent and lends a kind of believability.

Is there some significance in the fact that Sri Ramakrishna was born in winter--and his major disciples also--Sri Sarada Devi, Vivekananda, Maharaj, Swami Shivananda, Swami Saradananda, Swami Turiyananda, and others? Let me be a bit jocular and say it was because he knew before his birth that western people would become his followers and would want to attend festivities in India organized for him and his apostles, which they could do more conveniently in the cool months from December to March!

Ramakrishna remained childlike all his life. Even though he was a guru to men and women older than himself and was regarded as a master, in his personality Ramakrishna remained essentially a boy. Does this trait hold significance for us? Does it bring him closer to us personally?

Emphatically yes. He valued the openness, the candor, and the enthusiasm of the adolescent. Boys are gay, active, and full of hope, full of fun. He was not like the Man of Sorrows who had preceded him. He could be light-hearted and very funny..In the young there is a genuineness and lack of calculation. Ramakrishna said many times that a calculating man cannot attain God. One must be open, frank. This is what Ramakrishna meant when he said: "Blessed is he who remains a boy to the end of his days."

Not only childlike but practically illiterate. What was his purpose in presenting himself in this age of mass enlightenment as someone unable to read and write? Could it have been so as to teach mankind that information and knowledge are not the same thing, and that knowledge is more important than information? The present age is an age marked by an enormous increment of information. Radios and television sets spew it forth, as do newspapers and magazines. Unprecedented numbers of people are attending college. But all this does not necessarily provide wisdom, sagacity, knowledge. Ramakrishna could not read Sanskrit texts, yet what the Sanskrit texts said, people were astonished to find he knew perfectly. He could not read textbooks and romances and poetry and histories--but he communicated to others perfectly the message they convey--the ordinary man's main concerns are sex pleasure and the attainment of preeminence through money--lust and greed. (Read the seven volumes of Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past--a master portrait of our age--and you will see how true this is.) If you analyze world literature you will find the theme generally boils down to woman or gold or both. Ramakrishna's mind was such that he struck through "information" to the truth which lay behind it.

Today we have so much information that it has become necessary to invent the computer to contain and deliver it as needed. Through the accumulation of information modern research is seeking to factor out the real. A study of the phenomenal is supposed to bring us eventually to the principles behind the phenomenal. Our exploration of outer space is justified as a means toward "unlocking the secrets of the universe". Once when the compiler of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, M., tried to explain through a diagram how the phases of the moon affected the earth's tides, Ramakrishna put his hands to his ears and cried: "Stop! Stop! You are making me dizzy. All I know is that the Lord is real and all else is illusory." To some of us this reaction makes Ramakrishna very dear.

I don't mean to say that Ramakrishna was a reactionary, against all things modern, against culture and scientific investigation. It is just that, established in knowledge, he cut through all busy-work to arrive at the heart of the matter. The conclusion to which man will come when he has piled up all knowledge and investigated all phenomena Ramakrishna already knew.

It seems that Ramakrishna rejected the importance of money. He could not touch a coin, and even in sleep he recoiled when a coin was placed on his body. The explanation of this is that his renunciation of wealth was so intense, his dependence on God as sole provider so absolute, that he felt that dealing with money to be a sort of betrayal of his principles. The astonishing thing about Sri Ramakrishna was that every concept he accepted was accepted fully--not merely an intellectual acceptance, but as a personality readjustment, a realignment of the unconscious, according to that conviction. His rejection of Hindu ways when he practiced the Muslim religion is another example of this. Even physical characteristics changed as a result of his convictions, as happened when he practiced the madhura-bhava and thought of himself as a female lover of Sri Krishna.

But I like to believe that Ramakrishna's rejection of money--indeed of metal of all kinds--had a further significance. He also rejected mathematics--just at the moment the world was about to enter an age when

everything was to be depersonalized, quantified, and reduced to numbers. It was this whole trend toward dehumanization which he rejected, the replacing of human relations with the manipulation of ciphers. You may say, But the world has grown so complicated that we have to do things this way. Agreed. But the Avatar stands by first principles and emphasizes his message. Computerizing everything is all beside the point; it is not necessarily wrong, but it has nothing to do with essentials. It has the effect of alienating man from man and man from himself. This message, which admittedly seems reactionary, is not for the masses anyway--who will go on with their computers and trips to the moon and must accept all the consequences that so-called progress begets--but for the few ready to apply the Avatar's message.

There is another aspect to Ramakrishna's rejection of money. As a priest at the Dakshineswar temple he was paid a salary. But he preferred not to draw the money, as he felt he was working for the love of God and not for recompense. "I love to do what I am doing. Why should anyone pay me for that?" This was his attitude. He made of his daily work a pleasing pastime. We have a good deal to learn from this attitude.

11.

Ramakrishna was married and yet was celibate. How could that be? Why? What I have learned concerning this subject is based on Swami Saradananda's explanation, found in his masterpiece Ramakrishna the Great Master.

The Incarnation comes in order that man may progress by worshipping him. He therefore must possess universal, idealized characteristics, which people can emulate or at least attempt to emulate. Yashoda saw the whole universe in Baby Krishna's mouth. Ramakrishna said he felt his jaws reached from one end of the universe to the other. Thus a militant will define Christ as an activist and love him for his revolutionary qualities. A moralist will see Christ as a law-giver. A sick person as a healer. An evangelistic-minded individual will think of Christ as a saviour. The Incarnation lends himself willingly to all roles and elevates his admirers by way of their devotion to him in accordance with their capacity.

As a world teacher Ramakrishna contained in himself all archetypes or models. He was an ideal child, ideal husband, ideal servant, ideal monk, ideal woman, ideal courtesan, ideal father-figure, ideal sage. Thus he legitimized and blessed all human conditions.

Marriage is one of the accepted stages in Hindu society. Ramakrishna married and so endorsed the married state as legitimate. He did not condemn marriage or regard it as an inferior state. On the contrary, he showed how to idealize the nuptial relation and elevate it to a level spiritualizing to each partner. Any married person may learn much from Ramakrishna's marital attitudes.

Ramakrishna was at the same time an ideal renunciate or monk, and even went so far as to take the vows of sannyas, thus becoming a swami. Any sannyasin may learn much from his behavior. He was a model of the declared objectives of the wearer of the kaupin: compassion for others, renunciation, willingness

to give solace to people nearly twenty-four hours of the day, modesty, passionate search for God.

It may also be presumed that Ramakrishna took formal sannyas so as to be able to create an order of sannyasins possessing an impeccable monastic heritage. The sannyas guru of Ramakrishna was Totapuri, who was a member of the Puri order of monks founded by Sri Shankara, whose mother house is at Sringeri in southwest India. Ramakrishna's monastic disciples, destined to preach his message and demonstrate his example, were thus attached to an admirable monastic family tree.

Ramakrishna lived as a woman for some six months in 1866. So complete was his identification with this state that his bodily characteristics became womanly. The male organ was absorbed into his body, and he menstruated. This is really extraordinary, nearly unbelievable. He said that he assumed the female sex in order to be more able to worship Sri Krishna as a gopi--that is to say, with the mad ardor of a woman illicitly in love with a paramour, a love heedless of the conventions of society. According to Hindu calculations such is counted as being the most intense of all forms of love.

But I believe that it was also a part of this great quality of the Incarnation of being everything to all people. Once Ramakrishna was asked whether he was a man or a woman, and he responded that he really didn't know. Only now are we realizing that there is much maleness in women and much femaleness in men. And thank goodness that this is now recognized. The old stereotyped notion that men are completely male and women completely female separates the sexes as well as produces many psychological maladjustments in both when they perceive that such is not the case. In the Victorian period in which Ramakrishna lived women were considered a species apart. They were man's responsibility, but were also his property and his toy. Such has been, with some variations, the position of women always and everywhere.

The movement toward the liberation of women in our day has balanced this situation. Women are seeking and gaining all rights of men, including typical male roles, and men are realizing to their relief that they may manifest so-called womanly characteristics without social ostracism if they so desire: child-rearing, housework, a subservient role in marriage. There is even said to have been organized a men's liberation front to protect men's rights to act womanly if they so wish. There appeared recently in the "New York Times" an article addressed to men titled: "Now You Have the Right to cry if You Want To."

All accounts of Ramakrishna emphasize the suggestion that Ramakrishna came in order to bring reconciliation. Not the least of this reconciliation is that between the sexes, and also between the ambisexual tendencies which thrive in each person--that is to say, reconciliation with the disparate drives of one's own character. I admire and love him for this.

It follows of course that Sri Ramakrishna should have taken a woman as a guru--namely the Bhairavi Brahmani. The first reason for his doing so was in order to be able to practice tantric disciplines. Tantra is a daring religious discipline employing techniques aimed at spiritualizing the sensate, or forcing the sensuous to reveal the spiritual. Tantra can be an aberrant path and a dangerous one for most people

because of the aspirant's involvement with base physical aspects: faeces, dead bodies, meat, wine, sexual relations without consummation. In his attempt to use mayaic agencies as a means for transcending maya, the individual may become entrapped in maya. But so-called base elements can help a devotee if they are manipulated with the conviction that they too are genuine aspects of reality. Nothing is degrading if the idea of Brahman-is-all is clearly present. A female partner and instructor was necessary for some of the tantric exercises Sri Ramakrishna wished to engage in; the Bhairavi Brahmani served as that partner.

As I see it, a second reason why Ramakrishna took a woman as guru was so as to be able to endorse the truth that women can be spiritual and have a right to become renunciates. And as we know, when Ramakrishna died, Sri Sarada Devi became chief guru and exemplar for the movement.

And then there was the fact of Mother Kali and the importance of this strange figure in Ramakrishna's life. Of course, Ramakrishna was a worshipper of all deities, but Kali the Mother was his favorite Ideal. What shall we say? Because the Kali symbol is the best explanation available of the way creation works--the two sides so in opposition--one representing the horrible reality of carnage, suffering, and death, and the other all the sweet facets of existence. All this poised on the prostrate body of Shiva, the impersonal. Two-sided Shakti has seemed to vanquish Brahman, and Shiva looks up from beneath her feet in assent. The Kali image is a tremendous conception, when you realize that all this is God. And if you can accept the entire ensemble as God, and love it, then you will be able to traverse safely your existence and your demise. Sister Nivedita was a worshipper of Kali and died triumphantly when cut down at only forty-two. In his latter days Vivekananda too became enamoured of Kali and at his death at thirty-nine went to her willingly as a tired child to a loving mother.

Another reason why Ramakrishna worshipped Kali is that Kali represented Mother, God as Mother. He always saw woman's highest fulfillment as that of the mother figure. And he solved the question of man-woman relations by assuming, with respect to women, the role of a boy child. If a man thinks of woman as mother and himself as her child, purity is easier to maintain between the sexes. This is a concept which he wanted to teach.

But Ramakrishna was far from exclusive in his adoration of Mother Kali. He became a devotee of many paths : Vaishnavism, Shaivism, nondualism, tantra, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism; and he worshiped God as God's friend, lover, female companion, child, mistress, and servant--as a man, as a woman, and as a boy.

12.

All his life Ramakrishna made a religious laboratory of himself; he plunged in and tried all faiths, and in so doing discovered by experiment and so confirmed a most significant religious truth: So many paths, so many ways.

A seemingly enigmatic statement of Ramakrishna was: "Those whose last life it is, will come here." He

didn't say to come to him and get saved. He used the word "here" in the same sense as Sri Krishna used the word "me".

Give me your whole heart.
Love and adore me.
Worship me always,
Bow to me only,
And you shall find me.

What Ramakrishna meant was: "If you've been through it all you will come here. From whatever race, from whatever religion, think of me, love me, whatever you are, and I shall see you through." By "here" he meant what he stood for, what he personified--all that I have tried to outline in this chapter, and earlier in Chapter Two. "Here" didn't mean the physical person Ramakrishna--it meant God, the Ground of all Being.

Then did Ramakrishna found a new church, with reconciliation as its theme, the Ramakrishna Mission as the agent of its hierarchy, with its Vatican at Belur Math? Yes and no. He said that those who come to him form a new "caste", the "caste" of devotee. "While he yet talked to the people, behold his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him. Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren." But they who form this new "caste" are devotees of an Incarnation who preached all approaches--no exclusive creed, no exclusive caste. There is no exclusiveness there; so it follows that there can be no church. Those who would want to build an institution based on the veneration solely of Ramakrishna would be sabotaging the nature of the truth which he taught. The theme of the new Incarnation is that everything in this world will take you to God if seen as God, and if that is where you want to go. This is an absurdly high ideal, but unless the ideal is held high, people don't try to aim high. This is Ramakrishna's message to the world of today: if God-knowledge is your objective, I shall help you to achieve it.

13.

Why did Ramakrishna choose to die of cancer? His vulnerability to the scourge of our age has upset many people. But it can equally be seen as a gesture on God's part demonstrating his sense of fraternity with man. Much has been made of Christ's form of death. Dying on a cross seems madly extraordinary to us of today and so is given extraordinary interpretations. Yet it was an end in perfect accordance with practices of the time. Crucifixion was a normal and frequently practiced method of dispatching criminals and deviates in the first century of our era. To say that Christ died on the cross in order to save man from his sins is not the main point. He became redeemer not by being crucified but in the manner all Incarnations do. As God Incarnate he freely accepted the body of a human so that his teachings and grace should be available to humans. This is what God does for us "when goodness grows weak, when evil increases", and in a particular fashion appropriate to the times and man's need.

And having done this, having taken a human form, he must undergo a human death, and such, like every other gesture of his life, will have significance. In Jesus' case it was to proclaim his acceptance of the brutality of the world and to set up such a pity and horror in the hearts of his followers that they would turn from brutality. He died an inhuman death in order to encourage the humanization of life which western man was to try to adopt and still sometimes attempts.

In Ramakrishna's case, his death from cancer was an act proclaiming God's comprehension of and identification with man the sufferer. What fitting gesture can God make after living as a man than to die as a man? And die in a particularly significant manner? He thus demonstrated also that Kali's left side is as true as her right side. Death is as necessary as life and must be embraced with equal acceptance. Later Ramakrishna's disciple Vivekananda, in his own turn, was to shout: "Come death."

A Christian will say, "Ah, yes, but Christ didn't remain dead." Of course not; that is the proof of the avatar. His power continues in the world after his physical disappearance, making his form immortal. Incarnations can be seen by those who love them for centuries after their physical disappearance. Throughout the two thousand years after Christ's passing away many have seen Jesus and I believe many see him still. I beheld in India with my physical eyes in 1952 two persons who had seen Ramakrishna in the flesh nearly seventy years before. That was a remarkable privilege and for it I am everlastingly thankful. But every day I behold something more remarkable still. I see people who have seen Ramakrishna in spirit, with the inner eye--an even more significant seeing. This I think is what Christ meant when he said: "I go to prepare a place for you, and where I am, there ye shall be also." The fact that he lived, but also died, forces us to turn inward. God is spirit and is to be seen in spirit. The place he prepares for us is in us, and there he resurrects.

14.

This, then has been an account of the Devotee's effort to express his admiration for Sri Ramakrishna. In doing so the Devotee has been obliged to "interpret" Sri Ramakrishna in terms of world history and spiritual significance. The Devotee thus has had the temerity to go beyond where even Vivekananda dared to go. Although Swamiji was the Master's chosen explainer and popularizer, he declared often that his master was so great that even he himself comprehended Ramakrishna very little. Well, fools rush in....

Swamiji could not know what was in store for the world during the next centuries, and neither can we, any more than people in Jesus' time could know what was going to happen between then and now. But I would venture to say that the overall result of Christ's advent was the humanizing of western man--imperfect as that turned out to be. While the overall result of Ramakrishna's advent will be in the future an acceptance of the great variability of man and the welcome of all variables into the kingdom of heaven. In a letter written to a Muslim gentleman, Swami Vivekananda phrased this possibility in the following words: "Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expression of The Religion which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best."

And of course walk ahead confidently in it. "To achieve this unitive knowledge," the Perennial Philosophy reminds us, "to realize this supreme identity, is the final end and purpose of human existence" .

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Eight

The Devotee as Sadhu

1.

I shall begin this chapter with a case history, a true clinical report.

When I joined the Vedanta Society of Southern California as a monastic probationer it never occurred to me that the essence of spiritual life is meditation. Remember, this was forty years ago, well before the quietist revolution of the 1960's had broken out in America, which was to honor Zen, yoga, and other disciplines teaching the need for going within. Swami Prabhavananda had established it as a rule that his disciples should go to the chapel for meditation at least two times a day. And so I went, morning and evening.

But five years passed and I felt that I had gained very little spiritually. I was still a dabbler, was still the same rank amateur in relation to any kind of inner life which I had been the day I entered--a spiritual outsider.

It had been determined that I was soon to take brahmacharya. I began to fear that I should be entering upon this engagement under false pretenses if something didn't change. I told my guru so. "Can't you take some urgent measures?" I asked. "This is serious. Don't you have some intensive remedy to apply, to cure a bad case of spiritual backwardness?"

"All right," he replied. "Do a year's purascharana."

My heart contracted. I knew what this meant from having read *The Eternal Companion*. Great masses of japam, whose quantity was to increase or diminish by one thousand repetitions per day according to the phase of the moon, to reach a hefty fifteen thousand once a month, on full-moon day. A half hour or so of japam in dark phases, but four to six hours of it as the moon moved toward full zenith.

I was aware of Swami Brahmananda's confidence in the efficacy of japam. Swami Prabhavananda had often told us about something he had witnessed as a young novice at Belur Math around 1920. At that period several monastics were required to share the same dormitory room. One of the occupants of the room where the then young Prabhavananda lodged was an older man who had been given permission to enter, after some years of worldly life, much beyond the normal age limit. "What an intense struggle he had to make to gain purification," Swami would explain. "Maharaj's prescription for him was japam in large doses. I used to wake up in the night and see him there, seated on his bed with his mala in his hand, by the hour. And it did work. I tell you, my child, it did work; it does work."

Prabhavananda also used to tell us how, as a young probationer, he had visited a renowned holy man and had asked this saintly person how he had attained wisdom. The response was one Hindi word--"nama"--repetition of the name of the Lord.

Well, I did it. For twelve months my whole life centered on japam. I rejoiced in the moon's dark phases and struggled through its climaxes. I never failed to do the repetitions required for that particular day, although at times I did not get the final hundreds done until late in the evening, half asleep; and once the repeating went over into the early minutes of the following day.

I took brahmacharya in the summer of 1955. Prabhavananda had selected a full-moon day, which was also the birthday of Swami Niranjanananda, as an auspicious date for administering our vows. But what did that choice signal for me and my japam? I was living at Santa Barbara at that time, overseeing the construction of the new temple, lodged in a caravan on the temple site. The ceremony was to be performed at the Trabuco monastery, more than two hundred kilometres to the south. I felt that I could not be absent from the temple work for more than twenty-four hours. I would drive to the monastery the afternoon before the ceremony, prepare for and participate in the ceremony the following morning, and drive back that afternoon. Then how could I do fourteen or fifteen thousand repetitions of the mantram? On this red-letter day in my life surely I would be justified in putting aside my rosary and giving relief to the thumb and calloused middle finger of my right hand.

"No!" replied Swami, in reply to my eager suggestion. "Make some other adjustment. Don't baby the mind. The essence of puracharana is no exception. You've taken up the commitment; now fulfill it." Of course he was right, and I managed the required repetitions by rearranging the proposed schedule.

That purascharana produces an effect, for me there can be no doubt. Let me try to describe it in as clinical a fashion as possible.

First of all, you feel virtuous. There is an expression used in Christianity: state of grace. A state of grace enfolds you when you feel you are making an effort to do what you should be doing and to avoid doing what you should not be doing. Grace comes as one makes a positive response to His request: "If you love me, keep my commandments." It might be said that enjoying a state of grace is the same thing as attaining a clear conscience. Or is equivalent, I should think, to what Indian teachers refer to as gaining the grace of your own mind. You feel inwardly strong and right and enthusiastic. This is definitely what I felt during that year of purascharana.

Or you could say that this effect is simply a case of God rewarding one's effort to please him. Or that by one's sacrifice one gains his sympathetic attention. The rising smoke of our burning offering is pleasant in his nostrils. I don't believe such explanations; they are too anthropomorphic. I would rather call achieving a state of grace the lawful psychological consequence of sacrifice, of discipline. How often we have heard that the mind is like an unruly youngster. Doing purascharana tells that child with steady insistence: I mean business. So it responds. Instead of continuing to behave like a spoilt infant it becomes co-operative, helpful, charming.

Without doubt it would be preferable if one were naturally infused with longing, ardent longing. Passionate thirst for God is what characterizes the true mystic. But in the absence of longing, there remains effort.

As the mind finds itself brought to heel it begins its reform. Its whole attitude becomes refashioned, remodeled. The presence of the Holy Name, strenuously applied, as the Russian monk in *The Way of the Pilgrim* explains it, reorients the mind's way of looking at things. Or to use a homely simile, here is an inkwell fixed to a desk. To clean it, pour in water. Bit by bit the dirty, dried residue will be dislodged and will flow away. In religious terms we can say that japam causes some light to shine out from the paramatman. In psychological terms it may be supposed that the sheath of ananda is rendered a little less opaque through the vigorous rubbing it gets from the Word.

Another effect I noticed--my clinical report would not be complete without my mentioning this side-effect--was an increase in psychic energy. Or stated in layman's terms, intensive japam seems to have an aphrodisiac effect. (It is well known, of course, that yogic techniques can be used, or mis-used, by those who are sense-minded, to increase sensual powers. I could see how this could be.) For the continent this sensation transmutes itself into happiness and enthusiasm--"delight" is the word the Russian Pilgrim often uses. One may describe this euphoria as the emotional consequence of obtaining the grace of one's own mind.

The clinical technique of shock therapy is used as a treatment for mental disorders in extreme cases. No one knows exactly how this technique works, but it is sometimes explained figuratively that the passage of a charge of electricity through the body causes the molecules of the disturbed mind to be, as it were, thrown up in the air, to fall back in a different and healthier pattern. Or that the unconscious, fearing that it is going to be incapacitated by the treatment, defends itself by behaving in a more rational manner. A similar realignment of "molecules", or rather a better balance of the mind's chemistry, is now claimed as the result of so-called mind-bending drugs. Something similar happens in ordinary life in everyday circumstances also. A normal person, let it be noted, experiences a kind of shock therapy as a result of being involved in a road accident, a desperate illness, or upon hearing some fatal news. "From that day on," he will say, "I saw things differently." Or, "After that my outlook was no longer the same." One may guess that massive injections of japam may work in a manner analogue, to produce a like effect: shaking or shocking or bending the mind toward a new orientation.

This case history would not be complete if I failed to mention a permanent consequence of that year's purascharana. I find that I repeat the mantram, or rather that the mantram repeats itself, when the mind is "in neutral"--when I am walking alone, when doing manual tasks, when preparing to sleep, when lying drowsily half-conscious before fully waking. We speak of such an ingrained habit as something which has become second nature. One may quip that in the case of japam what has become second nature goes a long way toward prying open the sought-after first, or primary, nature.

But to conclude. I closed the year's purascharana with the assurance that I was on the inside track at last. When the molecules blown up by japam had settled down, I found that I had become committed, that I

had become an insider--even, in potential, a devotee.

2.

And diary keeping, as I have already said, has proved to be an exercise of immense usefulness. From my first painful day at Hollywood until now, recourse to my journal has seen me through many terrors and opened my eyes to much until then hidden. Perhaps not the most efficient of techniques--requiring up to now sixty-one volumes comprising some 8,000 pages on which are written more than 2,000,000 words; all this hardly constitutes a quick-cure approach--but it has served me well.

Many aids are available to the devotee or would-be devotee. Prayer is helpful, confession to a guru or confessor is helpful, asceticism is useful, meditation is essential, and japam, as just described, is of powerful assistance.

But the ever-available diary, like the neutral ear of a Freudian psychiatrist, may invite personal examination of real therapeutic value and so lead to self-knowledge. As therapist Marsha Sinetar says in her *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics*, "...the individual must establish a bond with an unknown, invisible part of himself before he can become whole. This means that he must be willing to face what heretofore he was afraid of facing--his own shadowy, perhaps demonic self, his cowardly, loathed secret self which he himself has rejected and hidden, often successfully, from others." In his journal pages--so silent and so discreet--one can ask why, complain, vent one's anger, search for answers, yell.

Yes, it is bookstrap psychotherapy, but what is wrong with that if it works? How often do we have to be told that God is within, that--as Swamiji said--all help is within and comes from within--before we believe it? Diary-keeping is a means of extorting the inner answer, of talking with the hidden God.

"Who am I?" is a classic question which Ramana Maharshi thrust continually at those troubled persons who came to him in droves, asking: "Why does this happen to me? Why should I suffer? Why do I not succeed? Why am I not happy?" "But who is this I?" the Maharshi would demand. Diary keeping is one of the best means I have found for solving the Maharshi's riddle.

Who I am can, bit by bit, be discovered by the conscientious diaryist. His entries, thoughtful, devoid of pretense, devoid of editing, can little by little evoke new understandings. Knowledge, the highest virtue in Buddhist terms, means the capacity to penetrate into the meaning of maya in such a way as to destroy maya's power over one; to invalidate through this continual examination of illusion, the power of illusion.

One obtains, thus, a quantity of do-it-yourself minor realizations whose cumulative effect is enlightening. That alteration of character which the devotee seeks comes through a series of small experiences or perceptions, from which he extracts knowledge of who in fact he is and what his behavior should be. I have found this to be a valid technique.

Swamiji quotes Shankara in his Inspired Talks (July 18): "An intense search after one's own reality is bhakti." Remarkable! I have found such to be perfectly true.

3.

But a psychic shock even more effective than purascharana was in store for me, the event of January 6-7, 1964. Surely this is the most important date of my life. In fact, as I review all that has taken place since my birth--the bad times, the good times, and the preponderant number of insipid times--I realize that what occurred on this day nearly thirty years ago far overshadowed anything else that had ever happened to me before or since. On January 6-7, 1964, early in the morning in the main temple at Belur Math, I pronounced the vows of sannyas, and thus drew a dividing line between all that had gone before since my beginnings and all that would come till death. Call it an initiation into the mysteries, or a rebirth in spirit, or an ordination. Whatever it was, it marked the end of what had been John Yale and created a new being, Swami Vidyatmananda: "One who experiences intense bliss in the knowledge of God."

But I would be dishonest to claim that the change was neat and abrupt. As I have said before, I believe that instantaneous conversions occur but rarely. Rather, think of two wedges set one atop the other, the one tapering off and the other growing from a point thicker. That is how it has been with me. Sannyas means complete dependance upon God. An Indian scripture says that some take sannyas to confirm a state of God-centeredness which they have already reached, and some take sannyas with the intention of reaching that state. The latter was the case with me. From today's vantage point I can see that the wedge of world-centeredness has been nearly bypassed and that one is reaching the thicker part of the wedge of God-centeredness.

I believe that the state of sannyas is the most elevated that anyone can attain. It capsulates the highest, fantastically highest, spiritual ideal. I thought so before I took the vows, and I think so more now that I have tried to live as a sannyasin for a number of years. I feel a new awe every time I look at myself clad in gerrua.

In 1964 a swami was a rare and precious being, at least in the West. Almost the only swamis we knew were Indians, heads of centers and gurus, and generally disciples of original disciples of Sri Ramakrishna or Sri Sarada Devi. I was awe-struck by the idea that I might be permitted to join so august a company. In the intervening years there has come a change. Nowadays enrollment for a few months in a yoga school in India, or a brief apprenticeship to an independent sannyasin, may allow an American or a European to "graduate" with the "degree" of Swami. We of the Ramakrishna Order who are obliged to undergo a novitiate of nine or ten years (in my case it was fourteen) may regard these sannyasins--to use an expression current in World War II, describing officers turned out by the Army or Navy in three-months' courses--as the Ninety-Day-Wonders of monastic life. This is not to deny that some may be pious and useful. It's just that this compressed process of reaching sannyas is something different from what we knew.

I am the ninth westerner to take sannyas in the Ramakrishna Order of monks. Swami Vivekananda approved initiating western candidates into sannyas, as he reveals in his letters, and by himself initiating Leon Landsberg into sannyas as Swami Kripananda in 1895 and a yoga teacher named Dr. Street, who became Swami Yogananda, the following year. (Swamiji also gave sannyas to three, perhaps four, women. Madame Marie Louise became Swami Abhayananda in 1895. Mrs. Sara Bull and Miss Margaret Noble received sannyas in 1899, as documented by Marie Louise Burke in her *Swami Vivekananda: His Second Visit to the West*, pages 120-122. Miss Christina Greenstidel--Sister Christine--may have received sannyas from Swamiji, but the evidence on this is conflicting.)

According to information supplied by Swami Chidrupananda of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, a San Francisco resident named Pelican, known as Prashanta, preceded Gurudas Maharaj (see below) at Shanta Ashrama and also in India; he became Swami Yogeshananda and may be counted as the third westerner initiated into sannyas in the Order. The fourth was Swami Atulananda (Gurudas Maharaj), described in Chapter Twelve at the end of this book. As he himself says in his published conversations, *Atman Alone Abides*, he was given brahmacharya by Swami Abhedananda in New York in 1899; he took sannyas at Belur Math in 1923.

The fifth is Swami Chidrupananda of San Francisco, who joined in 1933, took brahmacharya in 1935, and sannyas in 1962. These facts were supplied by the Swami himself. The sixth is Swami Atmaghananda, formerly of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York. In a letter to me he states that he joined in 1939, took brahmacharya in 1949 and sannyas in 1959. He reassumed his former name of John Moffitt in 1963. The seventh is Swami Krishnananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Krishnananda informs me that he joined in 1940, took brahmacharya in 1947 and sannyas in 1957.

Then follow Swami Anamananda and myself. We took sannyas on the same day (as will be recounted in the pages which follow), but I should be listed in second place since Anamananda joined as a novice a few months before my joining on April 1, 1950, and thus is senior to me. He took brahmacharya one year before I did.

In recent years there have been a number of initiations of westerners into sannyas, so that the total at the present time may be something on the order of twenty. This represents about 5 per cent of the total membership, the remainder of the thousand or so members of the Ramakrishna Order being Indian. It does not seem to be likely that the proportion of westerners to Indians will modify much in the near future, but the number of nationalities represented will increase, as there are now novices of American, English, German, French, Dutch; Spanish, and Japanese nationalities training to be sannyasins. A Dutch brahmachari was given sannyas in 1984, and a brahmachari of German nationality in 1988.

As in Catholic orders, members of the Ramakrishna Order must pass through stages before taking final vows. One joins initially as a probationer, for a period of a year. This should occur before one has reached the age of twenty-five. In cases of college graduates the acceptance age limit can be extended to thirty. Other requirements for candidates: graduation from high school, and the possession of spiritual

tendencies, as outlined in a simple set of precepts. After a year as preprobationer one may request probationary status, which lasts on principle for four years, two of which may be spent in the Training Center, the Order's theological seminary at Belur Math. At the end of five years from first joining, one is eligible for the first vows, called brahmacharya. At every stage, it should be noted, the recommendation of the head of the center where the candidate resides is required.

Trips to India being expensive, since 1947 brahmacharya has sometimes been given in the West. Permission of Headquarters is necessary, as well as the consent of swamis working in the West, who presumably know the candidate and will attest to his fitness and will perhaps attend the investiture ceremony.

4.

I took brahmacharya on 3 August, 1955, at the Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon, California. There was one other candidate, Philip Griggs, who became on that day Brahmachari Buddha Chaitanya (later Swami Yogeshananda); I became Brahmachari Prema Chaitanya. Swami Prabhavananda performed the ceremony, and witnesses were Swami Vandanananda, Swami Krishnananda, and two brahmacharis who had taken the vows the previous year. One of these, Ananta Chaitanya, did not continue in the Order. The other, Arupa Chaitanya, took sannyas with me nine years later and became Swami Anamananda.

The ceremony was performed in the morning in the library before the fireplace. In the fireplace was placed the copper vessel in which was built a sacred fire, into which we thrust our sacrifices, symbolized by offerings of leaves and flowers.

I had already observed the difference between the manner of performing Catholic ritual and Hindu ritual. Catholic ritual unfolds with a finesse that leaves a profound impression on the observer. Perhaps it is largely theater, but it is good theater. But often Hindu ritual seems ill prepared, ill rehearsed, gauchely executed. The idea seems to be to get through it, reciting the correct mantras, making the correct mudras, presenting the correct offerings; but because of whispered consultations that occur, and frantic gestures to supply some ingredient forgotten, the impact for the westerner is less affecting than it might be. I recall seeing a woman performing a puja at Hardwar when I first visited India in 1952. As the worship proceeded she kept crying for this item or that, which helpers supplied with much scurrying. Phil and I had not been supplied with the text in advance, so we had no idea what we were engaging ourselves in. (When I took sannyas, the entire ceremony, except for those three especially sacred mantras mentioned in Chapter Four, was given to me for rehearsal in advance.)

Two blunders happened that day at Trabuco which I particularly remember. First, the dhotis which we wore had been received from India only a day or two before. They were perfectly new, as required, but they were also full of manufacturer's starch, which a hurried washing had failed to eliminate sufficiently, so that they stood out stiffly as if supported by stays--having the look of skirts worn by ladies going to a formal ball in the eighteenth century. This defect was especially disconcerting when we sat down or

knelt. The other was Swami Prabhavananda's reading of the wrong line where the vows refer to celibacy. There are alternate lines, to be read depending on the circumstances, both for men and for women. Instead of his reading the line saying that we promised not to marry, but to live a celibate life, Swami Prabhavananda nearly had us promise, before stopping himself just before the "I do", to renounce our husbands. This caused titters and for me reduced the impact of what I had expected to be a moving experience.

Brahmacharya vows are provisional, are resolves to try. I could take these engagements fairly easily. But sannyas was a different matter. The normal wait between brahmacharya and sannyas is four years. In my case it was nearly nine, and even then up to the last months before taking sannyas I felt unsure.

5.

My idea of the sannyasin was and is very high. He is the one authentic being who is as true inside as he appears outside. In this world of religious sham, self-indulgent cult leaders, false preachers, priests with concubines, the Ramakrishna Mission swami must be the one example of perfect integrity. I could not break this ideal by taking sannyas and then not being able to measure up. I ran over in my mind the list of defective religious persons I had met in my life. My story of the lady evangelist came back to me and the supposed infidelities of our pastor in North Lansing. I recalled a particularly self-indulgent priest I had known in Mason, Michigan. Horrors! To end up being like that!

As related in Chapter Five, the year 1963 was celebrated in our Order as the Centenary of the birth of Swami Vivekananda. There would be a Parliament of Religions at Calcutta and other celebrations in all our centers to mark the closing of this jubilee year on 6-7 January, 1964. Swami Prabhavananda was going to India for the occasion, and Christopher Isherwood had been invited to address the Parliament as honored lecturer. It was an auspicious moment for me to take the plunge.

I believe that if you are really sincere you will be aided at critical moments. This happened to me. The wild cross-purposes which I had always known began to settle down. An inner solidity replaced my characteristic uncertainty. There was a conviction that all that meditation and japam I had done over the years had after all recomposed the molecules of my mind as promised. The sensation was of an inner healing after an illness full of fever and delirium. Tangible evidence came from my dreams, which became less frustrated and brighter, pleasanter.

And curiously enough, there came to mind from long before Lyle Spencer's old advice: If you want to be sure of reaching San Francisco, take the chance that is offered you of getting as far as Kansas City.

The final evidence came from an experience which occurred after I had reached India, at Kamarpukur, on November 25, Swami Premananda's birthday. It seemed to me, as Plotinus phrased it, that He had let me into a new realm. The effect was conviction. All at once I felt that sannyas was what I wanted and that it would be right for me to take it. With that assurance I went to Belur Math and spent the days before, during, and after the ceremony in a state of childlike joy.

It was to be the last--or so I hopefully thought--of the many name changes which I have experienced. As a youngster I'd never had a nickname; I was too much of a little gentleman to invite such informality. When in 1937 I went to Follett Publishing Company and authored my first book, I decided to alter my pedestrian first name John to the more picturesque Jonathan. My mother had sometimes called me this. And there are numerous Jonathans in the Yale ancestry. Then for some reason I "shortened" Jonathan to Nathan. Nathan Yale was, I thought, a catchy name for a writer as it put one in mind of the notable early American hero Nathan Hale. I don't recall whether anything I wrote was published under this name. Fine, till a salesman who was clearly Jewish asked if I were Jewish. This brought me up short. And it is true that Nathan was at the time a popular first name in Jewish families. To me it was a good New England name, which reminded me of my granfather's Nathaniel. Nathan was both Jonathan and Nathaniel. But the Jewish implication decided me, and I shifted back again to plain John.

But it didn't stop there. When I joined the Vedanta Society Swami Prabhavananda ventured to give me an Indian name. Not right out, but tentatively to see whether it would take; that is to say, whether I would accept it. As his secretary, I was, he announced, his Ganesha. I didn't rise to the offer and he didn't insist. But when I took brahmacharya the name assigned to me was Prem Chaitanya. That same morning Bert DePry asked: "What did you say your name is, Preem (rhymes with cream)?" Preem was a brand name of a powdered cream widely advertised for use in coffee. "Oh no," I thought, "this problem from now on." Knowing that it was really Prema--ecstatic love for God--that Prabhavananda wished to invoke in me, I went and asked him whether we could use Prema instead of Prem. He assented. And I have been Prema ever since--but with misgivings. For the word is feminine; I have met Indian women with Prema as a first name. So have I carried, do I carry, a name not quite suitable for a male? I know not and have never known.

Every one of us candidates in that early morning of January 7, 1964, awaited anxiously the name-giving part of the sannyas ceremony to see what one was to be called from then on. I perhaps more than the others, given all I had experienced on this score; I hoped that whatever it was that I should be called, it wouldn't be a Sanskrit jawbreaker which no one at home would ever be able to navigate. My turn came and I knelt before Swami Madhavananda, awaiting the word. He spoke so low and so unclearly that I couldn't catch what he said. Ritatmananda, or something like that is what I thought he said. "What?" I whispered, feeling that I was demolishing a sacred moment. Again he uttered something and again I couldn't catch it. Twice seemed enough, so I pranamed and rose. "What was it?" I nervously asked candidates standing near me. "Vidyatmananda," one of them whispered. "Oh, Vidyatmananda," I repeated to myself, relieved. "Very, very nice."

But the name problem didn't stop there. When I returned to Hollywood Swami Prabhavananda began calling me Vidya. And so did Chris and a few others. One of the devotees got it wrong and began addressing me as Vidyat. I didn't like this as it seemed an unacceptable aberration of the Sanskrit word. But this did catch on in Gretz and I am now generally referred to at Gretz as Swami Vidyat. Putting the Swami before makes it more acceptable, I suppose. Swami Ritajananda is generally referred to as Swami

Rita.

Plain Vidya never caught on in Hollywood; it seemed inappropriate and perhaps disrespectful. So I let it be known that I preferred Prema for those who wished to address me familiarly, and that is the way it has come to be. I am Prema to my intimates. Poor Chris never knew where he stood. After 1964 he inscribed a book to me as Vidya, and on the next book was back again to Prema.

Even still the name problem has not subsided. For as I explain in Chapter Ten, the name Swami Vidyatmananda in France is too complicated for most professional purposes. So in these contacts I have found it practical to give my name as Monsieur Swami. But Swami Ritajananda is also Monsieur Swami, or The Swami. Hence to avoid confusion I often identify myself as Monsieur Swami American. Or, when the airline ticket reservation clerk asks for my name and I reply Monsieur Swami, and he persists in asking; "And what is your first name or initial?", I reply "V." "Fine," he says, satisfied, "Your place is reserved in the name of Monsieur V. Swami."

7.

I shall now tell what happened on those days of childlike joy. But rather than merely retelling the events leading up to and concluding with the taking of sannyas, I shall reproduce entries from my journal, as I find these accounts more vivid, more immediate, than any description I might compose.

Belur Math, January 2, 1964.

Now I am growing really tense--a spaceman who has been in training for years for the rocket shot. Today the twenty-one candidates have assembled. Tomorrow we meet with the seniors to consider the meaning of the ceremony. Saturday further meetings, and shaving. Sunday is shraddha. Monday fasting all day and the ceremony that night--2:00 in the morning Tuesday, really.

I can say that I desire this grace with all my heart. At long last I feel no hesitency; this is what I want above all else.

We are studying the mantras with Swami Gambhirananda [the then Assistant Secretary, later President, who had the bounty to write out the entire text in Sanskrit, with a translation in English, and drill us in the pronunciation].

Friday, January 3, 1964.

This morning as I got up and put on my trousers and sport shirt I thought, with relief, that this may be the last time I shall put on such clothes. Today our class of twenty-one meets with the seniors. Tomorrow we get shaved. Sunday we do the shraddha. But Monday is the day. Each morning when I wake up my first thought is to test myself. Am I feeling OK--am I still physically capable? [The vows are not given if a candidate is sick--a serious matter for one who has come ten thousand miles for the ceremony.] But every day

I realize that yes, I am getting closer to the day in safety; like a bride at the end of a very long engagement!

January 4.

Today begins the ordeal and glorious outcome. Last night when Ramesh Maharaj brought in my beautiful gerua clothes neatly tied in a bundle and labeled with my brahmachari name, I was just thrilled. Again I test myself this early A.M. and find that I am still quite OK, still capable, it seems, of remaining alive and well for three more days--then, what matter? "Newsweek" has a long article on Lyle Spencer and Science Research Associates--how IBM has merged SRA with itself and how Lyle's stock will be worth \$34,000,000. What would mine be worth today? Certainly several millions. Yet in the fifteen years since I left SRA so many changes have been worked in me, how can I even think of this? If I'd stayed I'd have been a suicide or drunkard or would have cracked up mentally. Lyle can't forgive me for getting out and for selling my stock. From a financial point of view this was the biggest mistake of my life. Of course it is foolish to think of what might have been. And especially now at thus very juncture, when Lyle has grown big and I have grown small. I now step out on the faith that the Lord is my security, my all.

So Lyle's fulfillment and mine occur at the same time. His good for him, mine good for me. We must respect each other.

January 6, 1964. Swamiji's Birthday. Early Morning.

The day has finally come. I am alive and well and although my hour of joy is still nearly twenty-four hours away, I believe I shall actually know that hour--something I long despaired of.

Just returned from the mangalarati [the first service of the day.] Crowds of people already here at 4:30 and the bandstand sending out music, the kitchen busy.

What kindness the Lord has shown me. I am here, Chris is here, Swami is here. The shraddha went off successfully--although messily--yesterday. My head is beautifully scalped. On the shelf sits my gerua dhoti, chadar, begging napkin, all tied up in the kaupinam [loin cloth].

The Sanskrit we have been studying sounds beautiful to the ear, if not easy to the tongue, and the meaning of the mantrams has certainly not--as in the case of the brahmacharya--disappointed me.

I see it is not a case of deserving sannyas so much as it is of wanting the state that sannyas aspires to. And I do want that: simplicity, purity, and a growing certainty that] am none other than spirit.

Evening. The huge day [a public feast day with speeches, concerts, and fireworks] passing, but I have done little besides pranam seniors and fast. I am happy and contented. I want this thing. I know what it means and I intend to fulfill, as best I can, the significance.

I wonder about the nakedness part. Yes, I can and will do it, because I have perhaps nearly overcome shame. Oddly, the last time I came even close to group nudity was when I was trying to join the Navy in 1941. Could two situations be more different? Getting used to flapping about in flowing garments. A skirt, really, and a shawl. Surely it is a uniform which would be a strong impetus toward control and purity.

Night. 12:30 midnight.

The night wears on. In the temple Kali Puja is being performed. The most beautiful song issued from the closed building as I walked by. Too tired and shakey to go in. The fast is utterly complete except for a cup or two of tea and an orange this morning--some eighteen hours ago. These only to avoid the headache which came the day before when I had nothing at all. Some candidates perhaps are sleeping. I don't know. I took a slight nap in the afternoon but none tonight except some mosquito-beset noddings, trying to do japam.

January 7, 1964.

Through the Lord's grace all was nicely done and I am Swami Vidyatmananda.

January 17, 1964. Belur Math.

The period of a week beginning with head shaving and ending tomorrow at the end of three days of biksha [food begging] will never be forgotten.

There was that last startled feeling just before the first razor stroke: the gangplank is about to go up; this is your last chance to go ashore. And I told my mind: no, I'm in this thing for keeps, and all the way. Pull up the gangplank; I'm sailing.

It has been a tense, physically exhausting week. The night of no sleep, the half day and then the full day of fasting, the walking about for three days on bare, sore feet to gather food here and there, like the bee, and sitting down anywhere to eat it.

The sannyas, like the shraddha, took about three and a half hours. The shraddha seemed like a meaningless eternity. The sannyas went by like a flash. I shall never forget how we shucked off our clothes at the last moment before the full-length prostration [before the President, Swami Madhavananda] when we were given our name. How quickly these Indian garments drop off. Suddenly a great pile of white [dhotis and chadars], and small brown bodies excitedly lining up at that moment when we got our name and our staff. Then the breaking of the staff in the Ganges, now in gerua, some again stripping for a full plunge. The feeling of camaraderie is quite extraordinary, not only with the members of

our group, but with all the personnel here. I think that stripping before everybody had that effect. The rooting out of shame.

When I put on the gerrua and knew I was wearing it, I guess that was the greatest thrill of my life.

Although I am ten years older than the oldest of the group and twenty years older than several, I've felt like a free child again. We laugh constantly, and I treasure the hour when, bringing in our begging napkins, we sit down to eat together--these awful messes that people [householders living in the region] have dumped in. Strangely the food tastes good and I've not had the revulsion I expected. And the devoted way in which they give it, with whole families prostrating, just makes one weep.

Yes, it is all I had hoped for and more. And the idea of sannyas is so great. It isn't taking a resolution; it is getting free.

Chris remained till the day of our glory and rushed up to prostrate when we issued from the temple resplendent in gerrua, about 6:00 in the morning. Bless his heart.

These lines from my journal convey the spirit of the experience, if not all the details.

The ceremony of shraddha is a funeral service for one's ancestors. Since the sannyasin is considered to be cut off from his lineage, he finalizes his obligations to his parents and other ancestors before taking sannyas, as--severed from family ties--he will not be able to do so in the future. And since he will have no offspring to perform these rites for him, he does a funeral service for himself at the same time--in advance as it were. Hence he is considered dead until the next day, when he is reborn as a sannyasin. This ceremony was performed by us together in a tent next to the monks' quarters at Belur Math. The idea interested me, but the actual rites, which consisted mostly in making little balls of rice mixed with honey, water, and butter, and offering them to one's forbears (how startled mine would have been) impressed me as a messy affair. As usual, the ceremony, administered by brahmin priests called in from outside for the occasion, had a strangely amateurish, extemporaneous, haphazard air about it that provoked at times jeering remarks and laughter from the participants.

The ceremony of sannyas was performed in the main temple around a great bronze brasier in which burned a blazing fire. Its light revealed dimly the audience of two hundred or more gerrua figures--swamis--our senior brothers come to witness the ceremony. My guru was in that formidable audience. We addressed our prayers to the fire which, according to the old ideas, bore them upwards to the heavenly spheres, and placed our sacrifices in the fire--leaves dipped in melted butter, the single lock of hair that had been left when our heads were shaved--symbolizing the renouncement of our virility--and our sacred cord (you become, if not one already, a brahmin at brahmacharya) to symbolize that having attained the highest caste, we now abandoned forever the entire concept of caste.

There is a whole folklore relating to the kaupinum or loincloth. The great Shankara wrote a celebrated ode to it; rather, to the concept of sannyas which it symbolizes. Two simple strips of torn cloth, one a band around the waist, the other, suspended from the front and tied in the rear, hold the private parts snugly. The kaupinum has the same significance for the sannyasin as the tonsure has for the Catholic monk--a public announcement and private reminder of his vow of celibacy. Shankara praised the kaupinum not as an inhibiting agent but as a liberating one, for the wearer can conduct his relations with all, devoid of restraints or potential flirtatiousness that incipient sensuality always produces. Here is an English rendering of Shankara's "Five Stanzas on the Kaupin", quoted from Swami Nikhilananda's translation of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna:

Roaming ever in the grove of Vedanta,
Ever pleased with the beggar's morsel,
Ever walking with heart free from sorrow,
Blest indeed is the wearer of the loin-cloth.

Sitting at the foot of a tree for shelter,
Using the palms of the hands for eating,
Wrapped in a garment fine or ugly,
Blest indeed is the wearer of the loin-cloth.

Satisfied fully by the Bliss within him,
Curbing wholly the cravings of his senses,
Contemplating day and night the Absolute Brahman,
Blest indeed is the wearer of the loin-cloth.

Witnessing the changes of mind and body,
Naught but the Self within him beholding,
Thinking not of outer, of inner, or of middle,
Blest indeed is the wearer of the loin-cloth.

Chanting "Brahman", the word of Redemption,
Meditating only on "I am Brahman",
Living on alms and wandering freely,
Blest indeed is the wearer of the loin-cloth.

One of the kindly jokes of the whole proceedings concerned the name given to my Hollywood confrere. His brahmachari name, Arupa, meant "formless"--an aspect of Brahman. The night before, when the President was choosing names for candidates, he conferred with Swami Prabhavananda concerning the names proposed for Arupa and me. For Arupa he suggested "Anam", a second aspect of Brahman, signifying "nameless". Hence, when during the name-giving ceremony the candidate already formless was now also rendered nameless--Anamananda--a few sounds of amusement broke out in our ranks.

So with all these preparations and ceremonies and name-givings, what does sannyas mean? I once asked Prabhavananda, and his reply was: "It means living, moving, and having all one's being in God." On another occasion he said it means living in a state of utter reliance on God. Once he stressed its relation to everyday living: "Whatever happens to you from now on, even if it's bad, no bad can ever come to you again. Even if it's bad, it won't be bad for you."

As I study the affirmations we made that night I see the meaning as this: One has made a mighty declaration that one is none other than Brahman. You have resigned your position as a mortal. You have bypassed the sheaths of body, breath, mind, intellect, and ego. Of course, most of the time, when life tugs at your sleeve with its little calls and annoyances, you wonder if this can be true. But then at other moments the immensity of the concept overwhelms you and you sense that such is undeniably the case. Your life is a little like the condition of drunkenness, in which you are in two states at once--bemused experiencer and analytic observer.

8.

In Chapter Five I talked about Isherwood's book *A Meeting by the River* and how it came to be written. As I explained, this novel had its inception in the events having to do with our taking of sannyas.

I would like to close this chapter by reproducing the final pages from *A Meeting by the River*, a passage which I cannot even now, as was the case with my guru when he first read it long ago, contemplate without weeping. *A Meeting by the River*, the reader will remember, is a fable dealing with the "good" and "bad" sides of Everyman, represented by two brothers: Oliver, who takes sannyas; and Patrick, the sensualist, and until almost the end the unbeliever. The book describes the ultimate reconciliation of black and white, of the two parts of Everyman's nature, in God-centeredness. The beautiful gesture of Patrick prostrating before Oliver is a fictionalized account of the true fact, Chris's salutation of me in that memorable dawn.

Oliver is speaking:

Did Oliver die? No and Yes. I see now I was silly to expect some melodramatic transformation. Now I understand that the dying and being reborn are a gradual process. Nevertheless, since this morning, the process has truly begun and that's all that matters. I feel absolutely confident--sooner or later, through Swami's grace, Oliver will die.

Sannyas is far more than taking vows: it's entering into freedom. While I was out begging with the others this morning, I felt utterly free--as I hope to become increasingly--free from the burden of being Oliver. So, for the first time, there were no barriers between us, I wasn't an alien, and the others seemed to understand this, we kept smiling and laughing for no special reason.

I'm not saying this in self-pity but in amazement--up to today I'd lived a life without once

knowing what it really meant, to be happy.

When he [Patrick] left for the airport we were quite formal with each other and shook hands and murmured some conventional leave-taking phrases. But that didn't matter because we'd already had this other wonderful moment together which I shall always remember.

It was when we all came trooping out of the Temple at the end of the sannyas ceremony. That was like returning from the dead--I felt a sort of dazed joyful strangeness. A small crowd was waiting for us to appear, and Patrick was among them. My heart jumped when I saw him, I was so pleased. I'd never dreamed he would trouble to get up that early.

Everybody was watching us, to see how we'd behave. And of course I couldn't help being just a little bit embarrassed and self-conscious, standing there confronting him in my brand-new gerrua. He came towards me smiling, with his camera-case slung around his neck. As he walked he took the camera out of it, and when he was within a few feet of me he stopped and quickly snapped off half a dozen pictures. I felt foolish, but I realized that he had to do this, to show the Family.

Then Patrick put his camera away and suddenly without any warning he dropped to his knees and took the dust of my feet and bowed down before me! He must have been rehearsing this, he did it so smoothly and neatly. In the midst of my astonishment, I was aware of a strong favourable reaction from the audience. Once again, Patrick's instinct had been absolutely correct, he had done the dramatically perfect thing! So then I hastily grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him to his feet and hugged him. I did this to cover an uncontrollable attack of the giggles--I was shaking with it, and as I held him I felt him beginning to laugh, too. His lips just touched my ear in a sort of kiss and he whispered, "Well Olly, you've really gone and torn it now!" And I whispered back, "Looks like I'm stuck with it, doesn't it?"

At that moment I seemed to stand outside myself and see the two of us, and Swami, and the onlookers, all involved in this tremendous joke. I felt Swami's presence with us so intensely that I was afraid I would begin sobbing with joy and tell Patrick everything. So I pushed him away from me and stepped back. The others took this as a sign that it was now all right for them to approach us. And everyone was smiling and murmuring, as much as to say how charming it was of Patrick to play the scene according to our local Hindu rules, and how very right and proper it was that we two brothers should love each other.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Nine

The Devotee as Passenger to India and More

1.

We invent or imagine qualities in others in order to make up for lacks in ourselves, or to complement lacks. The splendid character of a beloved is mostly the invention of the ardent lover, and in time is seen to be what it really is--hardly better or worse than my own. The lack which I had hoped to fill, in making him or her a part of myself, still remains. We do this with places also. A tired city dweller will imagine that a move to the country will give him rest; of course it won't; rural tiredness will merely replace city fatigue. As to the country dweller, it is to the city that he turns for the self-fulfillment which up to then has evaded him. Since coming to France I was astonished to learn that Paris--which millions the world over would almost give their right arm to be able to live in--is felt to be nearly killing as a place of residence by many Parisians--although I have to admit that most of them wouldn't want to live permanently anywhere else. Their compromise is to clog the roads leading out of the city every Friday evening in the pursuit of rural weekends, and worn out and grumpy, suffer long traffic jams coming back home on Sunday night.

Thus people rush out from where they are, just as they seek new loves, different bright blue yonders, in the hope that over there, or out there--somewhere else--the lack they feel may be gratified.

An Oxford Fellow, Peter Conrad, speaks of this phenomenon in an interesting book entitled *Imagining America*. The book examines the pictures of America presented to the English reading public by British writers who concerned themselves with the U.S.A. Each went to North America expecting to experience there something he felt did not exist at home. *Imagining America* follows a number of English authors to the New World: Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, H. G Wells, Robert Louis Stevenson, and D. H. Lawrence. In the latter part of his book Conrad examines the activities of three gifted English authors who chose not only to go to the U.S.A. but to remain there: W. H. Auden, Aldous Huxley, and Christopher Isherwood. The pictures of America presented by these writers varied one from another, and none of course told the whole truth or maybe much objective truth about the country. The inner needs of the writers, rather than objective truth about America, are what were being portrayed. A new setting was simply a convenient motivator for reflection.

India has been particularly subject to this kind of imagining, and that for the past fifteen centuries. From Yuan Chwang in the seventh century to today's enthusiastic India lovers--and India decriers--the trend has continued. I am one who has done his share of imagining about India. My life has been enormously affected by my concept of India, and still is. But I see now, like a lover finally thrown back upon himself, that I had to go out in order to know where to discover what I was seeking. And that, of course, was within myself.

Hiouen-thsang and those who preceded and followed him found a land of marvels. Many Chinese pilgrims went to India to search out traces of Lord Buddha, and this they did, bringing back to China reporters' knapsacks full of information on the Indian man-god who was to become in time one of the deities of China. They also reported on Brahmanic doctrines and the riches and culture of the fabulous Bharat.

For centuries India played the role in men's imagination which astonishing planets play now in present-day science fiction: far away, hardly attainable, replete with wonders. Man must believe that the fabulous exists in order to be willing to support the pedestrianism of the present.

The British colonial voyager of the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth century could imagine an India serving him in varied ways. If he had failed at home he could there take up respectable exile. Or if you were young and had get up and go, India could offer you a shortcut to getting rich (if you didn't die first)--as did his brief governorship at Madras provide my ancestor, Elihu Yale. Or India could be thought of as an arena for adventure and heroism. Or if you were a scholar you could study exotic fauna and flora or equally exotic customs, languages, peoples, and gods. And to the evangelistic-minded Christian, India appeared to be an enormous field of idolators ready to be harvested for the Savior.

Europeans saw India according to their fashion and made careers for themselves in giving play to their imaginations concerning that country. For AbbŽ J. A. Dubois (*Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*), India's ignorance and poverty provided sure proof of Christianity's superiority. Some very fine travel books on India were published in the late eighteen-hundreds, such as Gustave le Bon's *Les Civilisations de l'Inde* and *L'Inde des Rajahs: Voyage Dans l'Inde Centrale* by Louis Rousselet; but the underlying theme was the same---India's backwardness and her need for occidental-style development.

This was the picture of India I held as a child in the 1920's. Returned missionaries broke into tears at the monthly meetings of our church's missionary society--often held in my family's home--as they described the misery and ignorance of that land. My mother was still giving money to missionaries working in India up to the time of her death in 1973. For Mother, India was a land which offered her the chance to play the humanitarian figure and the converter of the benighted she never succeeded in playing at home. What amusing play of karma caused her own son to adopt of his own choosing many of the religious attitudes she so fiercely scorned?

Someone has said that it takes fifty years for a new idea to become popular, and we can see how true this is. Swami Vivekananda's great effort in America and Britain from 1893 to 1900 to dispel the notion that India was a benighted country had made little dent in popular thinking more than a generation later--even more than two generations later. Traces of the old attitudes still exist.

Of course, not everyone saw India as a land to be exploited for profit or place or career. Sanskritists Paul Deussen and Max MŸller marveled at the riches of India's Vedic culture and brought those riches to public notice. As did Emile Bournof working in France. Yet they too invented an India built on their own imagination--a land of sages. Max MŸller never went to India, and Deussen only once, for two

months. But at least theirs was a more worthy invention; and we can understand Vivekananda's delight when in 1896 Max Müller published a book praising Sri Ramakrishna.

2.

The first stirrings of another India that was to be invented came, it may be said, in 1924 when E. M. Forster published *A Passage to India*. The title was drawn from a poem by Walt Whitman, in which the poet urges mankind to seek broader horizons. Read today, the novel *A Passage to India* strikes us as an excellent work of fiction but a period piece describing a culture already vanished--a bit like, say, the England described by the Brontës or something by Dickens. But what Forster's novel has to say was quite extraordinary in 1924: it said that while Indians were quite possibly lacking in certain qualities, their English overlords were also.

Forster attempted to show that while there is an occidental mind, there is equally an oriental mind which in its way is quite as worthy. In one place he speaks of suspicion being characteristic of Indians, but hypocrisy of Englishmen. He shows Indians as terribly lackadaisical, responding with yes and no at the same time, while the British are sure and see everything in black and white. Forster speaks much of the oriental muddle, contrasted to British orderliness, but depicts in scathing terms the sterility of English respectability. *A Passage to India* is as severe toward the British as toward the Indians, perhaps severer. (We now know how much of an independent thinker on social issues, despite his overt respectability, Forster really was.) Both are pictured as driven by the necessity of their situation and their heritage. A book of confrontations--by people of good will who simply cannot get together and who repent eventually of every attempt to do so .

Yet Forster ends with two conclusions remarkable for 1924--that India will become independent some time in the future when Europe is engaged in a western war, and that Fielding and Aziz--the two characters who represent enlightened members of their respective species--will become true friends, but not yet. Both prophecies have come true.

The imagining of India now moved ahead rapidly due in a large part to the genius of Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and Romain Rolland. Tagore, with this white beard, long hair, and prophet's robe--and his inspirational poems--could so easily have been a Christian. He conjured up before western eyes a wholly new and quite acceptable India. Gandhi even more so. It was hard to believe, but here, even though presenting himself as a half-naked fakir, was an undeniable hero of the spirit, an example even of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. And there, right in the middle of Europe, was Romain Rolland, friend of Tagore and Gandhi, crying out for virtues associated with India, at that time largely ignored in the West.

This summary neglects other contributors to the reinvention of India: Sir William Jones, Monier Williams, Annie Besant and the Theosophists, Leon Tolstoy, the earlier New England Transcendentalists, and many more.

The idea that India was respectable, that it had much to teach the West, now gained ground rapidly. There was Jawaharlal Nehru's thick history book *Discovery of India*. There was Vincent Sheehan's *Lead Kindly Light*. There were serious books by Indian and western philosophers treating Hinduism, and books by swamis of the Ramakrishna Order working in the West.

3.

In the 1950's appeared my travel book *A Yankee and the Swamis*. This book was never much of a success in terms of sales and maybe not in influence, but it was among the first to propose yet another reimagination of India, one which was to become extravagantly popular in the 1970's and is today: India as a place where disenchanted western people can go to seek enlightenment. That idea was to spawn the enormous inundation on India's already encumbered soil: of searchers after a quick psychological fix, of the wounded birds of industrialism, of yoga adepts and vegetarians, and of, of course, a certain number of devotees intent on touring the sites of Ramakrishna's life or seeking the darshan of such spiritual figures as Ramana Maharshi, Swami Ramdas, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh and the Mother, and Ananda Mayi Ma.

I do not forget the influence of Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* (1942) which first introduced to ordinary western people such conceptions as yoga practice and enlightenment. I have treated the Larry phenomenon in Chapter Five.

There were contrary opinions as well. V. S. Naipaul, a descendent of India born in Trinidad, hopefully returning to his forefathers' homeland and finding himself sorely disappointed there, in a book written in 1962, invented and described an India devoid of energy and new ideas, living on the dry husk of its past, a cultural pariah incapable of playing any cultural role in the modern world. I met Naipaul in London in 1964 and tried to counter his negativism by talking of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, and the possible renaissance these personalities might inspire. He remained unconvinced. However by 1980 Naipaul felt more encouraged. He still decried the cynicism of the privileged classes but felt that India's involvement in education had brought good results. In an interview published in *Newsweek*, July 3, 1989, he said: "The involvement in education seems to have paid off. There is a process of self-analysis going on which is quite remarkable and which has never happened in Indian history. There is play of mind constantly now in India" Three years later in new book entitled *A Million Mutinies Now* Naipaul spoke enthusiastically of a revolution in thought taking place in India in many areas.

Is the India I imagined in *The Yankee and the Swamis* the real India? I have had a long time to reflect on that question.

I was one of the first of the new sort of Western visitors to India who saw the country not from a hotel window, a first-class railway compartment, or the back of an elephant, but by going from ashrama to ashrama, temple to temple, in dhoti and sandals, almost as a native Indian, and to write about it. Although presently out of print, my book still serves as a sought-after handbook for Ramakrishna devotees making a pilgrimage to India and wanting to understand the religious significance of what they are going to see

there.

The book is an honest reportage by someone who tried to come to grips with India. I feel that it is balanced in that it touches on the mess and misery while at the same time delineates the spiritual values India has to offer a sincere seeker. The title tries to say that one enters spiritual life as a mere observer and ends up as an insider, a process which leads from the outside in and from afar to the center.

I made that trip as a kind of test two years after joining the Hollywood center as a monastic probationer. I well understood that our theology as well as our style of working flowed from India, and that my future life, if I were to become a member of the Order, would be largely directed from India by Indians. Therefore let me see India, the origin of our faith and the seat of our hierarchy, and what kind of forces directed our Order. I went green and bumptious and the book that emerged revealed me as green and bumptious. One Indian monastic brother characterized some of the language as saucy; in reading some passages today I wince. But it contains interpretations of permanent utility. Reread in 1988, the text seems dated as a travelogue but quite useful as recent social history.

Swami Prabhavananda tried to warn me, before I started for India, against disillusionment. He was right, for much that I saw in India, I must admit, nearly made me lose my fledgling faith, much as AndrŹ Gide completely renounced his adherence to communism after he toured Russia in 1934. Swami warned before I left: "Except for religious values, India is all nonsense." (He often argued that we could obtain the advantages of Vedanta by remaining in a western center--having all the best that India could offer while profiting at the same time, as he put it, from the comforts of western plumbing.) On the way, when I stopped at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York, Swami Nikhilananda, always eloquent on the subject of India's septic potentialities, warned: "India will kill you." (Tourism in India. now so commonplace and relatively comfortable, presented rigorous challenges in 1952.)

My attitude in India was to fearlessly probe into everything--the intrepid reporter. Of course I made the classic mistake of any self-assured observer who thinks he can find truth in a hurried glance. *A Yankee and the Swamis* is a book which one could write at thirty or thirty-five, but not at fifty or sixty. Yet it is not without value. As Christopher Isherwood evaluated it in a blurb he wrote for the flaps,

John Yale is a most unusual kind of traveler. He comes to India for the first time both as an outsider and an insider. He is able to see much that few westerners even catch a glimpse of; and though what he sees is new to him his training helps him understand it. As a writer, he possesses the art of making us relive his journey with him. He seems to know in advance just what questions we shall be wanting to ask and he answers them always lucidly, and often with insight and humor. I don't know of any other book that is quite like this one.

The text of *A Yankee and the Swamis* began appearing serially in issues of "Vedanta and the West". These chapters delighted western readers because they seemed to present for the first time the India of the Ramakrishna devotee as it really was and to let him see what it felt like to go there. (A sub-theme of

the book was the author' heroism in surmounting bizarre situations and physical ordeals.) And it is true that even today, although the situation has become so much easier as our Swamis have grown used to receiving western visitors, devotees tell me how much the book prepared them for what they were to see and possibly misunderstand, and how it helped them comprehend sympathetically the significance of their experience.

But the chapters brought me instant trouble in India. My writing was too candid where it concerned personalities. I heard later that new numbers of "Vedanta and the West" were awaited at every center which I had visited with trepidation--what had I in this latest chapter to say about the residents there?

Reports began reaching me that I was creating a scandal, that I was in disfavor in India, that the authorities would never grant me brahmacharya, much less sannyas. Finally the President of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Sankarananda, the dearest and kindest of men, perhaps goaded by those hurt by my reporting or afraid of being hurt, wrote to Swami Prabhavananda asking him to censor my texts. (I was surprised that Swami had never done so, for all manuscripts passed through his hands on the way to the press. The reason was that although Indian, Prabhavananda had lived in the West long enough so as to see many things as I did.) Hence from Chapter Four onward I became more restrained, and the whole text, before the book was published by Allen and Unwin, was revised with India's sensibilities in mind. Swami Vireswarananda, then Assistant Secretary of the Order, later President, read the final manuscript and approved it.

Writing A Yankee and the Swamis was an educational experience very salutary for me--the investigation of India, the discovery of the multifarious approaches to truth available there, and not least the fact that most western theology was kindergarten stuff compared to the fabulously rich and varied approaches available in Hinduism.

I have been to India twice since the 1952-53 trip which inspired A Yankee and the Swamis. When I went in 1963-64 for sannyas I thought that I might ask to remain permanently. (See the first section of Chapter Ten.) It is peculiar how India affects one--the ambivalence one feels toward her. Some aspects are so marvelous they make one love the country as one's own. Some aspects are so distasteful as to evoke extreme dislike--love and distaste at the same time.

A six-weeks' visit in 1971 confirmed my decision that I am better off living and working in the West. Imagining India had served its purpose. Going out had shown me the best way to come back, broadened, more educated, more inspired.

4.

It has long been accepted as a truism that the Ramakrishna movement will usher in a mutually beneficial exchange between East and West. Swami Vivekananda visualized this and took steps to initiate such an exchange during his own lifetime. But this has never really come about. Not more than a handful of western devotees or monastics have wished to settle permanently in India. The traffic has flowed more

successfully in the opposite direction. Many Indian Swamis have worked effectively and happily in America and Europe, albeit there were several who felt misplaced and insisted on an early return to their land of origin.

I never believed in the dream of mutual exchange. Perhaps it was an interesting idea in Swamiji's time, when India was materially backward and under the rule of a western power, when occidental sympathizers and technicians would be valuable acquisitions. But today it is difficult to visualize how the average western monastic could effectively serve Indians. India has entered the modern world and can competently handle her own affairs in most technical fields. Many of her sons and daughters have been educated in the West. Perhaps a few westerners whose language is English and are trained in editorial skills might be useful in connection with the Order's English publications; and indeed there has long existed a project to modernize the Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati as an editorial center where westerners could live and work in comfort. This might yet come about. Perhaps Mayavati might even become a center of intellectual ferment which the Order could well use. And a few western monastics might teach modern languages in the Order's schools. That is about all. Unless, of course, western members of the Order, especially fervent in their practice of Vedanta, were to work in India as preachers, presenting Ramakrishna Vedanta to Indians! Western missionaries teaching Indians to live their own faith more vigorously!

One hears that it is a sacrifice for an Indian sadhu to work in the West. The West is visualized as crass, dangerously sensual, populated by aggressive women who might make trouble, insistent on uncomfortable restrictions as to dress and behavior. To work in France, Germany, or Spain, for example, would require the acquisition of a new language. Many have refused to accept an assignment to the occident or have gone reluctantly. A Swami working in the West as assistant for some years, who eventually went back to India to assume a high post at Headquarters, told me in 1965: 'After all, India is our home, why should we be there? Far more scope here, in India, and in certain ways much more freedom.'

Thus the attitude has perpetuated itself that work in India is the real work: the West is not so very important, or at least not yet, although the West has been appreciated as a source of financial support. Thus we find swamis being sent to tribal regions in Assam, for example, to help bring primitive aboriginals into the modern world, or to counter missionary efforts to Christianize them, while it is reckoned as difficult to find sadhus available to work outside of India. Projects in India to give secular education to miriads of young people, to care for the bodies of countless sick, and to construct shelters for victims of perennial disasters proliferate, while fifty million Germans; fifty million Spaniards, and fifty million Italians are without Ramakrishna leadership. In all fairness, it must be stated that a member of the Order was recently spared to head the work in Holland and another was recently sent to Moscow .

So one asks, is famine and flood relief, reports of which currently make up more than half of the news items in the Order's monthly bulletin, the principal sort of relief that interests Ramakrishna's children? Today, a hundred years after the Order's inception, hardly more than 1 per cent of the total Indian personnel of the Order, not counting those working with Hindu populations in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore, and Fiji, labor outside of India. This despite Swami Vivekananda's

frequent pronouncements that Ramakrishna came for the world and not just for India. In a letter dated 1895, addressed to Swami Ranakrishnananda, the first President of our Order said: 'Was Sri Ramakrishna the savior of India merely? It is this narrow idea that has brought about India's ruin and her welfare is an impossibility as long as this is not rooted out.' I quote another letter from Vivekananda, that of the 20 November, 1896, addressed to Alasinga Perumal in Madras, in which he says, "And from these points [that is to say, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, and Allahabad] if the Lord is pleased, we will invade not only India but send over bands of preachers to every country in the world. That should be our first duty.... You must not forget that my interests are international and not Indian alone." The following lines were included in a letter Swamiji wrote on 24 April, 1897, from Darjeeling: 'Conquest of England, Europe and America--this should be our one supreme Mantram at present....Expansion is the sign of life and we must spread over the world with our spiritual ideals.'

So if the Ramakrishna Order cannot or will not send its representatives to the West, because of seeming priorities close at hand, the need will be met in other ways. This is already taking place, as we know. The past few years have seen an enormous expansion on the part of Indian-flavored organizations such as Krishna Consciousness, Transcendental Meditation, The Divine Life Society, the Self Realization Fellowship, and until recently the Rajneesh installation in Oregon which performed so sandalously. Krishna Consciousness, for example, boasts of one center in England, two in France, five in Italy, three in Belgium, three in Spain, two in Switzerland, one in Holland, and numerous establishments in other countries. The Sivananda centers conducted by Swami Vishnu Devananda are nearly as numerous. And so it goes. In addition, various free-lance sadhus have come from India, some founding centers, some remaining itinerant. Moreover one has seen the rise of countless movements claiming yoga or Indian orientation, but completely western except that the leaders (occidental) may have traveled in India, attended some yoga school there, and received some sort of ordination.

One cannot gainsay such organizations, for the success they enjoy proves that they are catering to manifest needs. And many preach reverence for, among other sources of inspiration, the poor brahmin of Kamarpukur.

The trustees of the Ramakrishna Order have decreed that the establishment of new centers in the West as well as in India should be prohibited for lack of personnel to lead them. At the same time it is understood at Headquarters that no swami of western origin may organize or lead a center. Both of these prohibitions are understandable. One sees the point. Yet they also effectively disenfranchise a substantial portion of the world's population from official contact with the Master's revelation.

The character of the Ramakrishna work in America and Europe, its impeccable reputation, and its large influence despite its numerical paucity, result from its professionalism; and generally that professionalism devolves from the fact that its heads of centers are Indians, descendants of a people which has immemorially devoted its main energy to the search for God. The Indian sadhu is endowed with authority in Vedantic matters which one rarely finds in the western swami no matter how well trained he might be in Hindu subjects.

About this my guru felt very strongly. Early in our association I asked him why he hadn't proposed sending me to the Training Center at Belur Math, the implication being that attendance there would professionalize me.

"Go if you want to," he replied, not pleased at all. "But you will gain more spiritually from staying right here."

"But I would, for instance, learn Bengali or Sanskrit."

"But that's why we translated the important works into English, so that you don't have to go to that bother. What you would acquire would be only a smattering, anyway." And he pointed out a couple of examples of howlers which even Max Mÿller had made in translating Sanskrit into English.

But as the saying goes, "something's got to give". And soon, if the Order wishes to see Ramakrishna's message accurately disseminated by his own ordained descendants.

5.

Several alternatives exist. Some setup could be organized, preferably in the West, to train intensively a few selected western sadhus as future leaders for permitted western centers. The history of religious movements in the past strongly suggests that indigenous personnel sooner or later will be required to take up leadership roles if any movement is to expand locally. A faithful Vedantist living in New York wrote me recently: "The centers here do not seem to be thriving, although Indians seem to abound. I responded to a letter from Y just last week in which he was reporting the same trend in Chicago. Vedanta does not seem to be attracting American newcomers... Many of us older Vedantists feel it is time for the American swamis to be leading the societies and speaking to Americans, young Americans, in a language that makes the teaching attractive and accessible. A culture gap is widening and it is to the detriment of the western work."

It is interesting to note that in a conference of sannyasin representatives of the four Ramakrishna centers in Europe, organized with the participation of the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Swami Gahanananda, in July, 1991, it was affirmed that western origin should not bar any suitably qualified swami from leadership of a western center.

Or our elders might simply let matters develop as they will. Let anybody and everybody preach Ramakrishna Vedanta--yes, St Paul's Gentiles--where and how he will. After all, Buddhism took strong hold outside the country of its origin, fostered by enthusiasts who had never had close contact with the Founder or his sangha. And Christianity from the earliest times was more a movement of non-Jews than of the Incarnation's own people.

But the preferable alternative, in my eyes, is that the Ramakrishna Math and Mission consider

converting itself from a primarily humanitarian movement concentrating on India, to an international movement of spiritual teaching. That would release much personnel for worldwide spiritual tasks.

Are we absolutely sure, as it is perennially claimed, that this humanitarian emphasis, so strongly followed in India, is Swami Vivekananda's wish for us today? Are we certain that we are not simply following ingrained models of operation which strike us as right because they seem, in India, to evoke so much popular approval?

May I even go so far as to respectfully suggest that this popular approval, which seems to make of our swamis selfless heroes--great karma yogins--and which convinces them of the nobility of their objective--may be deluding? Aldous Huxley's book *Grey Eminence* is a cautionary tale every swami should read. It is a biography of and reflection on the life of a French Capuchin of the 17th century, Father Joseph, who became the right-hand man and unofficial foreign minister of Cardinal Richelieu. Father Joseph was a perfect monk. He had conquered his senses, had no interest in money, lived a radically austere life, and devoted at least two hours a day to mental prayer, or meditation. He wanted nothing for himself. But he was convinced that God wanted Catholic France to become the leading power of Europe, and worked strenuously--often employing methods highly secular--to bring this about. He made a success of his work and considered his success not his but God's. But, muses Huxley, was it? What Father Joseph was a victim of--and didn't know it--was, in the words of Huxley, simply vicarious ambition.

The burden of my argument is that India must be imagined anew, or an earlier imagination renewed: homeland of seers and sages, of intrepid holy men who seek nothing but God, of world teachers of the Spirit. This is the India the western devotee wishes to envisage--he is not so impressed by buildings--and it may be argued that this is the India our sadhu brothers should envisage. Herein lies India's true talent and traditional destiny. Herein lies the hope of response to Naipaul's original pessimistic evaluations. It does not take special talent to organize schools, hospitals, and other humanitarian services. All advanced countries did so long ago, and all developing countries are doing so now. But what no other country could produce--almost in the space of a single century--is a Ramana Maharshi, an Ananda Mayi Ma, a Swami Brahmananda, a Swami Vivekananda, a Sri Sarada Devi, a Sri Ramakrishna, and the disciples they directly inspired.

Equally, the Ramakrishna sadhu must newly imagine himself. Let him meditate on the heart of a lion, as Swamiji told Ujjvala he himself did; or if not that, then on the example of Matteo Ricci, the Italian Jesuit who learned to be a perfect mandarin, so as to adequately present, to the Chinese, the message of his Master. Our Indian sadhu considers it risky to work in the West, hesitates to go to the trouble of learning a European language. Shame! Let him reflect on the American couple I describe in *A Yankee* and the Swamis who had courageously spent five years in South India mastering Tamil, in order to become effective Baptist missionaries in the province of Madras. Or let him think of his own ancestors who intrepidly took Hinduism to the southern seas. Should he serve in the West the Swami must remember that his primary responsibility is to the indigenous population. Although he may feel at ease with those individuals from his homeland who will inevitably be drawn to the center, he must not give the impression of favoring them or in essence fostering a hindu temple catering to expatriot Indians.

The Ramakrishna sadhu's is a unique heritage, and dispoiling it by spending his life and time as a white-collar executive, as a functionary, on managerial roles which many other educated and otherwise unemployed countrymen could do as well; such seems a waste of his special promise and perhaps disloyalty to his committment. As a young sadhu asked me in India: "Is all I am good for is instructing a few of my countrymen in auto mechanics and radio repairing so that they can go out and get a good job?" I recall an embarrassing scene which occurred during the commencement exercises of our big industrial training school near Belur Math, the Sri Sarada Pith. The ceremony was held during the Vivekananda Centenary period, and Swami Prabhavananda was invited as honored guest. The Principal gave his report, proudly pointing out successes among the members of the graduating class. So many boys had placed highly on national examinations, so many had qualified for advanced study, so many were assured of good positions after leaving the institution. When Swami Prabhavananda got up to give his talk he congratulated the Principal on the year's academic record, but then went on to ask, before a suddenly silent audience: "And how many, among the products of this Ramakrishna school, have been inspired to renounce the world and become brahmacharis in our Order?"

One may imagine oneself as a successful careerist, or one may imagine oneself as the successor of a rishi. If I may be so bold as to say so, the Ramakrishna swami must now reimagine himself as fool of God and world servant, literally ready to do what he pronises to do when he pronounces his vows. "The word sannyasin," said Vivekananda, "means divine outlaw, one might say, nihilist."

6.

A book which claimed attention a few years ago in the United States and in Europe was *The Third Wave* by Alvin Toffler. Another was *The Alternative Conspiracy* by Author? These are but two examples of futuristic writing whose ideas influenced and helped produce what finally became in 1992 the New Age movement. The ideas these books expressed were proliferated in countless other books, magazine articles, editorials, pamphlets, and underground reviews. The notion grew in the advanced countries of the world that the Industrial Age has developed so many faults that it must be replaced by another, variously termed the Aquarian Age or the era of the Whole Earth concept, or the epoch of the New Naturalism or of Environmentalism. What Toffler suggested is that the First Wave, the Agricultural Revolution, has risen and declined (although traces of it still remain in some Third World countries), to be followed by a Second Wave which he identifies as the Industrial Revolution. The Second Wave installed itself in the advanced nations two or three hundred years ago and has now nearly run its course-- a wave whose arrival the so-called developing countries are just now looking forward to hopefully-- much to the disquiet of some citizens who have already experienced it and found it couterproductive.

In the advanced countries, and that includes the former Soviet Union, and its satellites, the Second Wave is cresting out. And the Third Wave of--what shall we call it?--the Age of Wholesomeness?--is rising. While taking advantage of advanced technology, under Third Wave conditions, says Toffler, people will work less, live in simpler fashion close to the soil, pursue leisure more, and give far more attention than ever before to inner satisfactions, cultural pursuits, personal change and development, and something like the cultivation of the soul.

We have had foreshadowings of this trend for the past two or three decades, beginning with the hippie movement, the concerns of the French "enragés" (whom I describe in Section 8 of Chapter Ten), the passion of city dwellers to acquire country retreats, the popularity of tourism to remote and primitive areas, and the proliferation of self-improvement efforts by way of vegetarianism, positive thinking, naturalistic healing, religious dance, yoga and meditation; alternative medicine, and the like. I myself, and nearly all the persons mentioned in these pages, are examples of Third Wave converts, and this book is a Third Wave product. It may seem ironical that a country like India, still essentially a First Wave country moving into Second Wave status, should attract so many Third Wave enthusiasts. But no--passengers to India are going there in the search for Third Wave values.

And here we are faced with a further reason why the Ramakrishna Order swami must reimagine himself as Sannyasin Bold. Perhaps, perhaps he is the one who can reverse the unthinkable scenario which sees this beautiful world of ours reduced to an environmentalist graveyard. He has far more to tell the world than he knows. What I had to say about Ramakrishna in Chapter Seven argues that the Master came as a forerunner of and prophet of the Third Wave age, the Incarnation of the Age of Wholesomeness. Ramakrishna's whole personality, his preoccupation with human values, with inner development, with the unity of life, and his rejection of commercialism of debilitating kinds, proclaim him a rebel against Second Wave values and a superb example of Third Wave aspirations. Listen to the words of the famous American writer Tom Wolfe, spoken in June 1988 at Harvard University: "If there happens to be some great philosopher in the making, capable of creating a higher synthesis on the order of Rousseau or a Jefferson that will light up the sky and lead mankind into a new era, never has there been a moment in history for such a person to succeed more brilliantly." Our Sannyasin Bold has only to emulate and to preach Ramakrishna, and a following, West or East, will appear of its own accord. "Do you not see?" asked Jesus, "that the fields are ripe, ready to be plucked?"

The church of the Third Wave religion and its meeting house will be the "forest dwelling" of ancient India, the "desert" of Christ's earliest followers--in short, the ashrama. Swami Turiyananda foresaw this ninety years ago when he organized a band of early "cranks" to pioneer a forest life at Shanti Ashrama in central California. His expectations in 1900 read like a proclamation for today. And what he wanted then but couldn't carry out is only waiting to be put into effect now. Swami Vivekananda, impressed by the Greenacre experience in 1894, made some tentatives toward acquiring property in upper New York state for ashrama purposes; but his time was too short and the demands on him too various to get the project started. Yet his intentions were clear. I have already spoken of how he expressed himself to Swami Kripananda on the subject of ashramas.

Ideally an ashrama is a large property in the countryside, at a convenient distance from an important urban area and center of road, rail, and air travel. It provides living and working quarters for a good many people, plus a meeting hall and chapel. Devotees--yes, and this is important--non-devotees and potential devotees also--indeed, any suitable spiritual seeker--may come to the ashrama and there reside for longer or shorter periods.

Not all the underprivileged of this world, the deprived, the hungry, live in Third World countries. A

great many of them reside in American or European high-rise apartment buildings or suburban bungalows, bombarded by lethal doses of TV programming, sensate advertising, and constant assurances that sex and money insure happiness. This diet of intellectual junkfood produces junkfood's predictable result--people satiated and at the same time undernourished and hungry.

The ashrama provides an alternative to this modern materialistic way of life. The ashrama should be open in permanence; those who live in the nearby city may spend their Sundays there, or week-ends. Those who live in surrounding areas may come annually or semi-annually for longer stays. The Centre VĀdāntique Ramakrishna at Gretz, for example, draws from Paris and from all of France; and as well from Germany, Holland, Belgium, Italy, and Spain. How we wish that we who direct the center or our guests or both possessed the Gift of Tongues in order that we might each understand the other in his own language--an inconvenience which ashramas in the USA can happily escape! One of the functions of the ashrama is to liberate interested people residing in the hinterland from having to learn their Vedānta simply through books. And an ashrama organized as I describe it helps overcome the difficulty we face always of there being too few Vedānta centers in the West.

Like the painted sculptures in medieval churches, the way of life followed in the ashrama can give a vivid object-lesson to today's spiritually illiterate on how life should be organized in this difficult century. Ashrama-ites can experience the attraction of a sane life, centered around a spiritual ideal, and learn to emulate it. The daily routine of the ashrama--the periods of meditation, the opportunities for manual work, the occasions it affords to absorb something about maintaining a shelter and producing food--can bring people back to fundamentals. There is much to be learned, as earlier generations knew, from contact with vegetables, fruit trees, domestic animals, bees. Contemplating a tree pursuing its seasonal changes, while visualizing the Intelligence which directs that cycle, can be as uplifting as a scriptural text. At Gretz our grounds have become a nature preserve, and although we are only twenty miles from the heart of Paris, wild creatures live in peace in our forest, including deer and foxes. Going to sleep to birdcalls is better than requiring tranquilizers.

I have not mentioned the program which can be carried out in the ashrama. But I am convinced that it should not be based primarily on verbal instruction. The charisma of the monastic leadership will hold everything together and give direction; while the regular sessions in the meditation hall will work their eventual magic of character change. Such a variety of people will come, possessing so many skills, having such fresh and youthful views, that a dynamic program will practically form of itself--from animal husbandry to organic gardening, from the study of music to the practice of relaxation techniques, from editing and the study of languages and scriptures to repairs and maintenance. Perhaps the most telling instruction will be imparted by the very atmosphere.

I am of course aware that some of our Western Vedānta centers already do what I am describing to a certain extent. Several maintain properties to which members go in the summer. Positive as such retreats are, these activities are not what I have in mind. They are of short duration and are generally limited to members of the center's in-group.

The model which I have outlined here can provide a real service for troubled men and women and should, if put into operation, result in a formidable expansion of Ramakrishna's influence. I say this on the basis of the Gretz experience. I often tell our boys, and the many devotees who take regular responsibilities for keeping things going, "It is true that you are not heroically doing famine relief or looking after orphans or serving in a hospital as so many of our members in India are doing. But in helping to make the ashrama well ordered, peaceful, and beautiful, so that our guests can be happy and comfortable here you are offering noble service of a different sort. The West has plenty of its own kind of disaster victims who require relief, too.'

If Sri Ramakrishna be the Third Wave prophet, his sadhu son must be the Third Wave priest. He will teach as his master taught and as Turiyananda taught, and as Vivekananda wanted to teach. He will escew Second Wave strivings, go to the forest, and live a daily life as an exemplar and participant, close to the people. "...Ramakrishna," wrote Swamiji to Sturdy on 9 August, 1895, "has given us one great gift, the desire, and the lifelong struggle, not to talk alone, but to live the life." This is the reimagination I see emerging.

We hear that state and local governments in India would like and indeed are likely to take over--nationalize--and administer Ramakrishna Order humanitarian institutions. This happened in Burma and Sri Lanka and is constantly threatened in Bengal. Such seems to me to be a good thing and compatible with India's arrival at Second Wave proficiency; a desirable development since it will release Ramakrishna personnel for work as ashrama founders, as, if suitable, workers in the West. Swami Vivekananda's wish for his country, expressed so passionately a hundred years ago, that his homeland should experience a renaissance, has now been largely realized. India has been free and independent for nearly a half century. One may argue that it is for the civil authorities to carry forward the concerns which have until now burned up so much of our Order's available energy and manpower. Others of Swamiji's wishes, as I have tried to indicate, may now in their turn be given attention. The late Swami Vireswarananda remarked, in a speech given at the Bombay center on 18 February, 1978: "The message is more important than the social work done by the Mission." Amen.

7.

E. M. Forster found in the theme of Walt Whitman's poem "A Passage to India" an attractive and an appropriate title for his novel. In that poem Whitman glorifies the idea of going to India to seek out its ancient, saving wisdom, a theme which Forster treated ironically, since he found in the India he saw much that was less than enlightening.

But the really remarkable lines in Whitman's song come in the closing verse, not sufficiently noticed, which passengers to India, Indians, and those inspired by India may well read and read again and take to heart:

Passage to more than India!

For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go

And we will risk this ship, ourselves, and all.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Ten

The Devotee as "Manager-Maharaj"

1.

When in the early 1960's it became clear that I wanted to leave Hollywood, I cast about for somewhere else where I could live and work. Such a transfer proved to be more difficult than I would have imagined. I had thought that my many years of residence at the Vedanta Society of Southern California and my reputation as a productive person there would make it easy to find a new place. Nothing of the kind. By 1964 I was a sannyasin, which made me more difficult to place than, say, a promising novice, and fifty years old. What center would want to take responsibility for me, what head of center, since I would not be his disciple and might not prove maleable?

My first idea had been to stay on in India after sannyas. This I endeavored to do. I felt my qualifications as editor and writer would help me find a post easily, perhaps in the book department at Madras or with Advaita Ashrama at Calcutta and Mayavati. These centers publish books and revues in English. What could be more attractive to their direction than to have on the staff someone who possessed English as his mother tongue?

The preliminary step, of course, must be to obtain Swami Prabhavananda's permission. This, I knew, would not be easy to do, given his strong opinion as to the septic qualities of India. And he would feel my wish to absent myself from Hollywood a reflection on himself. Besides--I've never known--perhaps he loved and counted on me more than he revealed. We were at Madras together in mid-January 1964. I chose Maharaj's birthday--dear to Prabhavananda, when he would be in a mellow mood--to make the request. It was in the early morning. First I went to a flower-stand before the great Kapaleeswar Temple and bought a garland of Swami's and Maharaj's favorite flowers--white tuberoses. Back at the Math I found Swami Prabhavananda in his room, upset, not very well. I felt the gesture somehow insincere but knew I must go through with it anyway. Placing the garland around my guru's neck, I knelt at his feet and asked his permission to transfer to India permanently. He looked disgusted and took off the garland. "Have your experience for some time," he said, "and when you fall sick, then come back."

But despite feelers put out to the heads of both publishing branches, little enthusiasm was expressed for my availability. Yes, Swami Vivekananda visualized an exchange between East and West, but so far it has worked out mainly in one direction. I have discussed this subject in Chapter Eight. I can quite understand Indian reluctance to accept a western member on the staff. Such a foreigner will not be used to the austerities of Indian ashrama life. The foreign brother will probably resent India's inefficiency and might perhaps try to institute reforms. He is bound to be a bother, and allowance will always have to be made for his particular requirements. His health will probably decline, along with his enthusiasn for India, and having some available financial resources at his disposal--which very few Indian sadhus possess--he will simply fly in due course back to his homeland.

I lingered on in India all through the torrid spring and summer of 1964, hoping some call would come. I felt myself to be a great catch for some center. But no one seemed interested. What brought an end to this six months' spell of availability was a horrible bout of parathyphoid. It came on in Kamarpukur where I was staying while taking photographs for my little book Ramakrishna's Teachings Illustrated.. I had gone out early one morning to record country scenes at Tajpur, near Ramakrishna's birthplace. Indian hospitality demanded that the householder at the locality where I was photographing should offer me some refreshment. There was a delay, and I noticed a child rushing with a container in hand to a nearby house. Soon he was back and soon a cup of tea was before me, half tea and half hot milk, as it is drunk in Bengal. I understood that the child had been sent to fetch milk from a neighbor and wondered if there had been time to properly boil it. I accepted the tea as civility bid me to, but with misgivings. The next day I was sicker than I have ever been in my life, with parathyphoid. Local aid was mustered, but I got worse, and someone had to be sent the two-hundred kilometre round trip to Calcutta to bring antibiotics.

This experience showed me how well founded was the Indian's reluctance to take me on as a permanent worker and how susceptible to oriental bugs I was. So, abandoning my project to stay in India--"when you fall sick, then come back"--I turned my reluctant steps in the direction of Hollywood. I had nowhere else to go.

Not exactly nowhere else to go. There had been a hint that I might see whether I could find a place at the Centre VĀdāntique Ramakrishna at Gretz in France. I had met Swami Ritajananda years before at Madras. A photo taken at the Sri Ramakrishna Math there in January, 1953, appears in my book A Yankee and the Swamis. Swami Ritajananda is present, together with about twenty-five others who were at Madras at that time, including Swami Shankarananda, then President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Swami Kailashananda, President of the Madras Math; and two brahmacharis who later as sannyasins were to hold important posts: Swami Budhananda, eventually President of Advaita Ashrama and later head of the New Delhi center; and Swami Swahananda, now leader of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Later on Swami Ritajananda and I became good friends when he was assistant minister at Hollywood in 1959-1961. He took over in Gretz as President in late 1961. He had told Swami Anamananda when the latter had stopped at Gretz on his way back from India in early 1964 that Gretz needed a manager. This news had been passed on to me.

But to me at that time Gretz seemed unattractive as a future assignment. I cannot understand my reluctance now, :more than twenty-five years later, for I have been happier at Gretz than anywhere else I have ever lived. The main objections in my mind when I demurred were, first, that Gretz operated as a farm, and second, that it gained its livelihood by functioning as a guest-taking ashrama. Both features seemed forbidding. Forced rural experiences as a boy to make me, as my parents hoped, more of a red-blooded all-American extrovert had marked me with a dislike for domestic animals, manure piles, unpleasant chores, muddy boots, and chapped hands. The second aspect of Gretz was equally unalluring. To be caught up in what was essentially a sort of resort hotel would mean living in the flurry of constant company. It would mean the end of the separation I had pretty well managed to maintain in Hollywood between office and residence, between occupational activities and some modicum of a personal life.

Gretz functions as an ashrama on a full-time basis, open the year around. It is the only western Ramakrishna center which does so. That is to say, as a domain to which any suitable individual, interested in deepening his spiritual life, may come for a longer or shorter stay. He is expected to pay a modest sum for room and board and to help with ashrama chores as much as he can. He is expected to be present in the chapel during meditation periods, to read in the library, and to profit from holy company. The pattern established in most western centers was otherwise. The typical center consisted of a city house where the swami-in-charge, or guru, lived, accompanied perhaps by one or two resident devotees or monastics, and where daily worship was performed and classes and meditation periods held at stated hours open to the public. The rest of the time the center remained shut, rather as a private house, except for callers coming on rendezvous arranged in advance. An occasional devotee might be accepted to stay over night now and then, and several intimates invited for Sunday lunch. On feast-days many might come for pujas and prasad. But this type of center never functioned as a guesthouse, as an ashrama.

I have written in Chapter Nine about the ashrama idea and how heartily I now approve of it as a means of catering to the needs of the sufferers of today's world. I believe that it should become the standard pattern for Vedanta work in the West. And some western centers are now moving toward this model. But conducting an ashrama exacts real sacrifices from those concerned with its management: broken reservations, late arrivals, early departures, catering to persons with dietary, physical, and psychological peculiarities, constant demands for the attention of the Swami, and the sociability which is the solace of many visitors.. Many guests prove to be older people--often single women--who are come to the ashrama for distraction and human warmth as well as for spiritual benefit. Well, providing "soulagement"--human comfort--as Swami Siddheswarananda often remarked, is a noble function also! All that said, an ashrama serves another real purpose because Ramakrishna centers in the West are so few and far between. Devotees in farflung locations can come to an ashrama once or twice a year for a period of intense spiritual concentration. Otherwise their relationship with the living faith may consist solely in correspondance and reading.

It seems strange to me now that when I resisted the idea of Gretz I hadn't listed as a third difficulty that of language. Living and working in France would require a knowledge of French. Oh yes, I'd studied French in school, but there's a great difference between textbook exercises and operating with a foreign people in their own tongue, especially if part of one's work consists in pronouncing homilies and giving lectures.

2.

Well, I went back to Hollywood reluctantly in the autumn of 1964 and was no doubt received there with equal reluctance. During my long absence the work I had formerly done had been absorbed by others; I had no wish to reassume it anyway. As related in Chapter Four, Swami Prabhavananda soon considered me a dangerous dissident, and I was, for my part, uneasy with him. I stayed on in this state of uncertainty for eighteen months which, counting the year passed in India, meant that I had suffered a directionless state for some two and a half years. It was an agonizing period and brought me an

everlasting sympathy for the many "boatpeople" in this world who are obliged to break old ties and start out anew.

What to do, where to go? There had been slight stirrings of interest from one or two other American centers, but no real welcome. I decided I'd try India again, live or die, or if Swami Ritajananda would accept me, transfer to the Centre VĀdantique Ramakrichna in France.

It was in February, 1966, two years after sannyas. A letter arrived from Swami Ritajananda saying that he had discussed the matter with friends and that he'd take me at Gretz on a year's trial basis.

I had spent the weeks awaiting the resolution of this question listening to a French language course recorded on phonograph records and trying to make a little progress in that tongue, occasionally interrupting my studies by listening to the nostalgic tones of that masterpiece, Asher Bilk's "Stranger on the Shore". Yes, and making up my mind that whatever came, I was a sannyasin, had nothing to fear, was in God's keeping, and would be faithful to my commitments, come what might.

3.

But what of the Centre VĀdantique Ramakrichna at this time, in 1966? I had spent the month of August there two years before, on the return from India. Its story was familiar to me. The condition of the Gretz center in 1966 was not very reassuring.

As we know, Swami Vivekananda had visited Paris several times at the turn of the century and had greatly admired French culture. But he had started no work there. A few years later Swami Abhedananda is said to have organized a group in Paris, but no trace of this is discernable today. Romain Rolland's books on Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda had been published in 1929, and Dhan Gopal Mukerjee's *The Face of Silence* had appeared in French in 1932. Throughout the 1930's Swami Yatiswarananda worked in Germany, Holland, Switzerland, and France as an itinerant lecturer on Vedanta philosophy. Jean Herbert, whose efforts were supported by Josephine MacLeod, was bringing out French translations of Swami Vivekananda's works and the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. On March 30, 1936, the year of the centenary of Sri Ramakrishna's birth, a celebration was held at the Sorbonne at which were present among others, Jean Herbert, Josephine MacLeod, Swami Yatiswarananda, and the renowned French orientalist Professor Paul Masson-Oursel. A call was issued at that meeting for the establishment of a Vedanta work on a permanent basis in France. A year later Swami Siddheswarananda had come to take charge. It was, again, Miss MacLead who recommended the Swami and paid his passage.

A detailed history of the Centre VĀdantique Ramakrichna has yet to be written. But in brief it is as follows. On arrival Swami Siddheswarananda was given hospitality by a Parisian couple named Mr. and Mrs. Marcel Sauton, and at first he resided in their flat. Classes and interviews were given there. Swami Siddheswarananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, and related to a princely family of Kerala, was a charming man. He learned French rapidly. He was soon able to explain Vedanta philosophy in French in

a vivid way. His manner of presentation appealed to the French love for philosophical disputation. Swami Siddheswarananda rapidly became popular.

As a subject of the British Empire he would have been liable to internment once France fell to the Nazi conquest. He retreated south to the region of Toulouse and Montpellier, where he lived out the war years. He spoke in local universities, and devotees from Paris and elsewhere, braving wartime travel restrictions, visited him when they could.

When the war was over Swami Siddheswarananda returned to Paris. It had long been the ambition of Mme. Sauton (Marcel Sauton had died during the war) to establish a domain outside Paris where the Swami could live with a few devotees and receive interested inquirers. Whether Mamaji, as Mrs. Sauton was familiarly called, clearly intended to establish an ashrama is not clear. In any case this is what resulted. By 1948 a big house, locally called the Chateau Bois Vignolles, with some subsidiary buildings and some farmland, had been acquired some thirty kilometres to the southeast of Paris, at the edge of the village of Gretz. What became the Centre Védantique Ramakrichna was established there.

As the years passed Swami Siddheswarananda attracted many friends and disciples. I myself spent a few days in Gretz in 1952 and found Swami Siddheswarananda captivatingly charming. He made one feel one was uniquely important to him. A half-dozen young women and an equal number of young men resided at the center, which was conducted as a working estate, Mme. Sauton proving to be an exceptionally effective chatelaine. Two residential buildings were added. Translations of Vedantic classics done by Swami Siddheswarananda and Mr. Sauton were published. There were always a few guests, and on Sunday when the Swami lectured, a large number came from Paris for the day. Vedanta was represented in France effectively.

But this golden age was not to continue. In 1953 Swami Siddheswarananda suffered a heart attack, and by 1957, at the age of 59, he was dead. Now began a difficult period. Two Indian swamis as assistants and possible successors had been sent during Swami Siddheswarananda's lifetime, Swamis Nisreyeshananda and Nityabodhananda. Mrs. Sauton who, as President and French, was the actual director of the center. She had found neither acceptable, and the two swamis soon left. Under the original constitution the representative of Belur Math, the swami nominally in charge (Swami Siddheswarananda) held the status only of an invited foreign guest.

A period of decline set in. The center was devoid of a sannyasin leader, and Belur Math refused to send a replacement until constitutional changes were made, giving the Swami-in-Charge real control over the direction of the center. By 1961 such modifications had been made and Swami Ritajananda was designated as President. Swami Ritajananda took up residence at Gretz in November, 1961. But what a problem to gain acceptance! His French was rudimentary, and having a modest and self-effacing personality, he was slow to make an impression. Swami Ritajananda was not only not French, and not fluent in French, he was also not at all like "our swami", Swami Siddheswarananda. The young men left, Mrs. Sauton and the women chose to live apart in the women's house, far from the "chateau" where the Swami resided. In 1963 Mrs. Sauton died and the women departed. Swami Ritajananda was undoubtedly

in charge, but in charge of what?

During the month I spent with him in the summer of 1964 Swami Ritajananda spoke often and openly of the precariousness of the situation. He had taken two or three new friends into the house to help replace those who had left, but the members of the household were insufficient to make a go of the huge place, money was scarce, and new support was slow in appearing.. The Swami wondered openly whether it would be possible to reanimate the work.

I knew thus what I was letting myself in for when on 1 April, 1966, sixteen years to the day of moving in at 1946 Ivar Avenue, I sailed from New York on the "Bremen". All the possessions I had retained were contained in two suitcases and a small trunk. It was the case of the typical immigrant, in reverse direction. Behind me was a farewell reception which Swami Prabhavananda had permitted, to put as good a face as possible before the Hollywood friends on what he seems to have regarded as a betrayal. Chris and Don Bachardy were at the reception. They gave me twenty-five dollars and a card drawn by Don bearing the somewhat Frenchy salut: "Vive Kananda". Just before my actual leaving Swami had turned tender for a moment and said: "Remember, whatever happens, even if it appears harmful, no harm can ever come to you." I was to rely on those words often in the days ahead. I visited all the American centers en route where, to my surprise, I was accepted as a "real" swami and was invited to speak. As the "Bremen" went down the Hudson and headed out to sea I understood what my yankee forefathers had felt when going in the opposite direction--an unknown land, unforeseeable dangers, perhaps hostile natives!

4.

Yes, that was a thought which came to me many times during the first years at Gretz, how painful it is to be an immigrant. Suddenly I knew what it felt like to be one of those awkward Italians or Germans or Poles I'd thought so ill of in the U.S.A.--and the many Spanish, Portugese, and Morrocan newcomers I was later to encounter in France. I was to appreciate their fortitude, all that they had had to go through, and how well they succeeded in the new setting. Many of them had at the outset not known anyone at all in the adopted land. I at least had a Ramakrishna center to land in, and a friendly Swami Ritajananda to give me shelter.

Rural existence, a life in public, and ignorance of the French language and attitudes--these were the expected hazards. A fourth, immediately to be confronted, was the climate of the Ile de France where Gretz is located. Over the years I have dealt with the first three ordeals fairly well, but have to say that the problem of the often wet and gloomy Gretz weather can still be depressing.

A devotee met me in his car at the Gare du Nord that Sunday afternoon, April 24, 1966, when I arrived to begin my year's trial assignment. As we reached our destination and started down the Boulevard Victor Hugo, there at the village limits was the road sign "Gretz" barely visible in the rainy half light. "This is it," I thought, trying to dominate a rapid pulse.

Swami Ritajananda was unwell and in bed when I arrived, but greeted me kindly. The rest of the household consisted of Jean Wertz and his wife HŽl•ne, Odette, Juliette, Marguerite, Madame Amba, Christa, and Brian. Jean was French, retired, and served as Treasurer. Odette, later Vimala, also French, did the cooking. Juliette, French, was in charge of the daily puja and the laundry. Marguerite, later Maitreyi, born in France, but a naturalized American citizen, did general housework and was in charge of book sales. Amba, French, edited the newly launched "VŽdanta" quarterly and helped Swami Ritajananda prepare the French texts of his lectures. Christa, German, and a disciple of Swami Yatiswarananda, was in charge of the womens' house, the greenhouse, and the vegetable garden. Red-haired Brian was Irish, in the mid-twenties. He was the outdoor man, one might say, the farmer. He looked after the fields and the cows.

And what, precisely, was my role to be? A look around the place showed me at once that it was not to be primarily sacerdotal. I would not be sitting in my room reading and preparing sermons, performing rituals in the chapel, or writing articles. Work clothes, not robes, would be my vestments at Gretz, and material more than religious activities my concern. During the decade since Swami Siddheswarananda had died the property had deteriorated. (So had the membership. It was twenty-three when I arrived.) Buildings were out of repair, interior roads were hardly more than muddy trails, the fields were full of weeds and rutted with gopher holes, the gatehouse a ruin. It was clear that my job was to get in and try to help pull the place together.

There had been an adjustment of the property a few years earlier, arranged by Mme. Sauton. The Center is in a part of Gretz known as Bois Vignolles. This district had always to be approached from the railroad station in a round-about way. A long-term village project had been to construct a footbridge across the railroad tracks and cut a new street from its foot directly into the Bois Vignolles area--a modification which would half the distance to the Centre of those arriving by train. The new street was to cut through one side of the ashrama's property. Part of the rump land across this new thoroughfare was to be given to the village for a new school, and part was to be sold. This whole readjustment was just getting under way as I arrived. A problem posed by the realignment was that the mens' residence, the Shivananda Kutir--to be separated from the main part of the property by the new street--eventually to be christened Boulevard Romain Rolland--was on the site sold. A new mens' residence would have to be provided.

There stood at the entrance of the property an enormous stone gatehouse called the communs. Built probably at the same time as the "ch%oteau", in about 1880, this building had served in the old days as a hangar for farm vehicles and tools, as a cow stable, with milk room where butter and cheese were made. There was a tower where pigeons nested and from which squabs could easily be procured for dinner by simply mounting the winding flight of steps to where the nests were and making one's selection from the baby birds. The second floor of the communs held a couple of lofts useful for storing farm products--plus twelve bedrooms for farm and domestic staff. The whole opened on a cobbled courtyard which in turn gave inward to the property and outward to Boulevard Victor Hugo. The building was not wired for electricity, nor provided with water or heating. And the sanitary facilities consisted of a distant outdoor privy hidden from the "ch%oteau" by a circle of bushes.

This vast building intrigued me. With its several staircases, halls wainscoted a chocolate brown, its rooms festooned with peeling wallpaper from an earlier epoch, its heavy beams, its peculiar odors, it evoked rural France of the nineteenth century. The tile roof was half in ruins, so that rain fell into some of the rooms, birds nested where they wished, mice, rats, and stray animals held sway. The courtyard was an area of thistle and wild blackberry vines. Rejected objects from the main house filled to overflowing those rooms still relatively weathertight.

So my first job at Gretz was to turn the communs into what eventually became the Brahmananda Bhavan. It took two years and most of the money realized from the sale of the Shivananda Kutir and adjoining land. But when we finished we had three suites for families, six rooms for men guests, and ten rooms for future men monastics--what an example of faith! As Brian had left, by that time we didn't have even a single brahmachari. The stable became the workshop of our future dream children, one of the old wagon rooms their "chapter" room, and the pigeon tower eventually was turned into a photographic studio. The whole well lighted, heated, and provided with adequate sanitary facilities. I was eventually to turn one of the oak-beamed lofts into a charming studio for myself, where I have lived joyfully for the past decade and where the documents enabling me to write this book, and the Macintosh word processor on which it has been composed, are housed.

5.

I said that producing the Brahmananda Bhavan was my first job, but that's not strictly true. The supreme priority was to learn French. To know what others are saying and to be able to speak with them was fundamental to everything else. And especially in my case, as I was obliged early on to contact people in the construction world and must soon take my place as Sunday sermon-giver.

Of course two or three in the house, and some of the devotees, spoke English. But I learned with blinding rapidity not to rely on any such crutches. Within a week after my arrival this happened: I was introduced to an influential devotee who I had been told spoke some English. To be pleasant I said a few words to her in English, congratulating her on her knowledge of my tongue. Her reply was swift and sharp, and in French: "That's of no importance. We are French. French is our language and we like to speak it and hear it spoken."

So I dug in. There happened to be attending the Center a woman named Madame Jeanne Sully. Daughter of the classical actor Jean Monet-Sully, whose bust adorns the Comédie Française, Jeanne had herself been an actress-member of that famous organization for many years. She was now in retirement. She accepted the job of making the dumb to speak, and within six months had me giving my first Sunday lectures. She was a perfect teacher. A knower and lover of the classic French poets and playwrights, she spoke not a word of English and couldn't have cared less. Who are the English and the Americans anyway? I studied Madrigal's Magic Key to French during the week and on Saturday spent hours with Jeanne in exhausting and stimulating French conversation. Of course she tried to soften the Americaness of my accent. I argued: "But everybody has some kind of accent. In France itself there is the accent of the north, of the Midi, a working-class accent, and the manner in which French is spoken in Paris.

Eveybody has some sort of accent."

"You're wrong there," Jeanne shot back. "I have no accent at all." And technically she was right. The French of the ComŹdie Fran•aise is considered to be the pure French, against which all other speech is measured. So of course the French Jeanne spoke was, as she claimed, accentless.

I can still hear her vociferating: "Articulate! Articulate! Open your mouth!" And it is true. What is important is to be understood. Anyone taking up a new language late in life is bound, the moment he says a word, to reveal his foreign origin. But if what he says is clear and comprehensible, accent doesn't much matter. Some French people even say that they find the American accent pleasing. I don't, but I cannot rid myself of mine. However, thanks to Jeanne, what I say is understood.

Those few words "We are French" was a phrase heard pretty often during my early years at Gretz. What it was really meant to convey was that the French are special, deign of special admiration and have little use for suggestions from outsiders. "We are French" is shorthand for reminding oneself and others of centuries of proud accomplishments: leading military force on the Continent, superb achievements in intellectual and artistic fields, a language that once was spoken by anyone in Europe--including the aristocracy of Russia and Poland--who was anyone. And the Frenchman wishes to feel that the ancient eminence is as strong today as heretofor, although he knows that this is not the case. Charles de Gaulle was President during my debutant period at the C.V.R. The formula he used (I can still hear him rolling the word on his tongue) was the word "gloire". There was, he often reminded his audiences, something singularly glorious about French history, French character, French institutions, and French intentions. These had set France apart from all others and would continue to do so. General de Gaulle never admitted that on the world scene France now occupied a secondary position, and always insisted that as far as "gloire" was concerned, France would forever remain foremost.

As an American and world traveler I judged this attitude ill-informed, na've, an unreasonable rationalization, although understandable. Twenty-five years ago Frenchmen traveled outside their country much less than now. They did not know or greatly care about others' accomplishments. With the concept of "gloire" as a inpregnable Maginot Line of self-congratulation they could feel superior and secure.

But the Yanks were coming again back to Europe, this time not as wartime defenders but as peacetime competitors and new style-setters--along with the Japanese and the Germans. American-Japanese-German technical know-how, for better or for worse, was overturning old concepts. These upstarts had developed "gloire" also, and theirs was modern "gloire". By the 1970's in industry and government this lesson had sunk in; in all domains great modernizations were in progress.

This trend toward internationalization and modernization was paralleled by events at Gretz. My coming to France--an American--as "Manager Maharaj"--was part of the trend. During the time of Swami Siddheswarananda the Centre VŹdantique Ramakrichna was thought of as a French center dedicated to the French. Relations with Belur Math were kept as distant as possible, and not one of the resident

members--the novices of the epoch--proposed taking the vows which would make him or her a member of the Ramakrishna Mission, hence a citizen of a broader world.

6.

Yes, concurrently with making myself French I found myself leading the French toward internationalization. Despite protests that no Frenchman would eat food which had not been freshly procured that day--a promenade to the local market to buy provisions being an important daily delight--we introduced a deepfreeze. It proved to be so convenient and, because we could store garden produce for winter, economical, that we quickly added others, until now there are seven, the newest a professional model of 750 kilos. As I write this, I have been informed that besides a week's supply of frozen bread and enough vegetables to see us through the winter, more than one hundred cakes baked in advance are stored. Plus such staples as dhal, cooked rice, and curries. Having a stock of eatables ready at hand reduces the servitude of the cooking department and the anxiety which all hosts feel that there might not be sufficient food on hand for unexpected arrivals.

A professional type washing machine was added to replace the soaking of clothes in laundry tubs and hand washing which was the practice before. And after that a professional-size clothes drier. "But drying clothes in the sun and wind is ever so much more satisfactory," was the objection. "Ah," was the reply, "you mean trying to dry then on days of gloom and wet." A restaurant-style dishwasher found rapid acceptance. Regular grass cutting was instituted, so that the park began to appear well maintained, the shredded grass of the lawns serving as compost to enrich the soil. At the breakfast table plastic honey squeezers, sent by friends from Florida, replaced the bowls where crumbly spoons and buttery knives extracting honey left their unpleasant residue.

But this was only superficial internationalization and would have happened in the course of time anyway. My Sunday lectures carried the thread into the realm of thought, often centering not on Hindu theory drawn from old scriptures but near-at-hand examples of Vedanta in practice, clothed in the words of living, breathing people of our time. I talked about Gurudas Maharaj, Sister Nivedita, Ujjvala and the pioneering work at Shanti Ashrama, Josephine MacLeod, Drinette Verdier, together with the contemporary swamis and their work--men and women like us, from many countries, who had made Vedanta a living force in their lives and furnished believable examples. Some of these examples are treated in Chapter Twelve.

It naturally seemed to Swami Ritajananda and me that what Gretz should be was a Vedanta ashrama serving all Europe, whose location happened to be close to that central point in Europe which is Paris. Internationalization was not easy to put into practice at the beginning. The sound of the German language at our table, spoken by disciples of Swami Yatiswarananda who had come as retreatants, was not greeted graciously by those older Frenchmen who had lived through the Occupation: "We heard enough of that in 1941-45," they grumbled. Quite understandable. But Germans came to the ashrama in increasing numbers and, quite aware of the prevailing attitude, conducted their conversations, even with each other, in English--or French if they knew French. Some Germans even went to the trouble of

studying English or French in anticipation of visits to Gretz. Belgians came, and Dutch, and Swiss, and a few from Scandinavian countries. Italians, Spanish, Portuguese. From England, to experience again something of the atmosphere of their former homeland, came many friends of Indian origin. And quantities of American devotees, touring Europe, made it a rule to stop over for a few days at Gretz. During meals one customarily hears conversations in three or four languages; and there are occasions when one can hear a symphony of twice that many different tongues.

I, frankly, am proud of this development. I think this is the way it should be. Here is a small sample of the Europe visualized by men of good will for generations and which is supposed to become a reality in a few years' time.. And also an example of Vedanta in practice, a working out of Ramakrishna's statement that his devotees constitute a new caste. Is Gretz not a microcosm thus of the world all mankind yearns for? Is Gretz not a proof of the re-imagination I call upon our brothers to make, as discussed in Chapter Eight?

7.

My American friends have sometimes asked me to tell them what the French are really like. That is a naïve demand, because of course the answer is that once you get to know any people they are found to be basically like everybody else. I find it difficult to distinguish any distinctly French characteristic. People are like a mirror, faithfully giving back to you what you give to them. Kind if I am kind, lovable if I am lovable, helpful if I am helpful. As an alien I have probably been treated better than I deserve. Practically all the friends I have today are people associated with Gretz, and I no longer think of myself as particularly American.

Yet there exists one rather unique national characteristic which I have become aware of. I believe the French are unusually strong in verbal facility. They possess a broad and yet precise, very expressive, vocabulary which can be brought to bear, seemingly by everybody, on large as well as small topics--and brought to bear with gusto and delight. In analyzing a subject, large or minute, the French are pastmasters. The art of discussion--or as it is called, disputation, is highly developed in France and greatly admired. We find writers and speakers becoming idols not so much on the basis of what they say as for the virtuoso fashion in which they handle words--something which I think would not be true of most other peoples. It is obvious that this quality makes the task of any foreigner who is called upon to present his ideas to a French public just that much more challenging.

I think, too, that the idea of change is unattractive to the French. By that I mean, changing oneself. Americans are enthusiastic about self-improvement, the overturning of past habits, personal growth, the remolding of character, new departures. I have not seen this to be an attractive notion to the French. They listen to our sermons on personal transformation politely enough but rarely seem to feel that the message might apply to those present. Yet this is changing as "New Age" concepts become popular in France.

Perhaps there is one other national characteristic. I hope I shall be forgiven for mentioning it: excessive

expression on the part of noses and throats! One has never before heard such an abundance of throat clearing, coughing, and noisy noseblowing as one hears in France. Perhaps the result of the relative absence of sun and the prevalence of damp.

8.

A big nudge to modernization and internationalization came to France in May of 1968, at the time of the student riots, when everything stopped for three weeks, the epoch of the "enragés". Nothing in France has ever been the same since. A general liberalizing was demanded and, as it turned out, granted. I had a glimpse, by chance, into the very crucible of the movement one day in Paris. I happened to be in the Latin Quarter, which I noticed seemed to be untypically hushed. No traffic on the usually crowded Boulevard Saint Michel. Turning a corner, I came upon an eerie sight. Seated in the middle of the pavement in silence, at the intersection of the Boulevard Saint Michel and the Boulevard St. Germain, were hundreds, thousands perhaps, of young people. And surrounding them, facing them, a black wall of battleready police, hooded, shields in aggressive posture.

Just at that time I had been scheduled to go to Switzerland for a few days in connection with my researches on Swami Vivekananda in Europe. When I left the trains were running as usual, but soon stopped. All was normal in Switzerland, but what was happening in France? Gasoline short, gas and electricity turned off, no transport, no telephone. I began to worry about the ashrama and felt my place was there facing things with the rest. But how to get back? I happened to notice an announcement that charter busses were being run by Sernam from Basle to Paris. I went to Basle, managed to get a seat, and started. Loading aboard enough gasoline for the trip to Paris as well as for the return journey, the driver crossed the border and began a curiously hesitant advance on empty roads toward the French capital some 500-600 kilometres distant. It was a strange expedition. He'd never driven the route before and constantly solicited road advice from the French passengers on board. Good, I thought, that I may attain Paris, but how in the world shall I manage to get from Paris to Gretz? The miracle is that the highway approaching Paris which had been chosen--surely not the best or most direct--was Route Nationale N^o 4, which ran at that time straight through Gretz. I got down from the bus a few hundred metres from the Center and walked into the house while the residents were eating dinner. They had suffered little serious hardship and wondered at my anxiety in feeling that I must at all costs get home.

9.

The Centre Védantique Ramakrichna is classed legally, for reasons I have already explained, as a foreign association. Its President is Indian. The "Manager-Maharaj" is American. Half the permanent residents are non-French, as are a large proportion of the retreatants. It is understood at the Gretz railroad station that any arrival who cannot speak French is probably heading for the Centre Védantique, as surely is any woman clad in a sari!

I doubt if even five per cent of the citizens of Gretz have any idea what our organization stands for, or have even entered the gate, except as workmen or deliverymen. We once heard a local resident, whose

car had broken down outside our entry and was using our telephone to call for aid, describe his automobile as stranded just in front of "the Hindu Club". One is reminded of the blindness in Jayranbati as to the identity of Sri Sarada Devi. "Directly below a lighted lantern there is a spot of darkness."

This doesn't make things easier for us. Yet I doubt if we have suffered much. We are known as quiet people, prompt payers of bills, and we keep up the property well.

Of course we find it frustrating, when it comes to getting something done officially, to be merely foreign guests, holding residence permits which theoretically could be revoked. To seek recourse against a neighborhood or boundary problem, to obtain permits or zoning changes, must be done with a minimum of insistence and a maximum of tact. Yes, our Active Members are largely French citizens, but our primary allegiance, as theirs, lies beyond purely French concerns. Our essential interests are not even of this world. We really shouldn't be located in any national entity at all; but in the present world such is not possible. Our situation is difficult for the local population to grasp. It recalls my condition of having been in, but not of, Mason, Michigan, decades before. We have insisted to the Mayor that the municipality should be proud to be the home of an organization known internationally, and privately reasoned that nobody in the world at large would ever have heard the word Gretz if it hadn't been that the Centre Védantique Ramakrishna was located there.

10.

I have often asked myself why people come to our ashrama. What makes it a going concern? It costs them effort and expense to get there, and if they eat Sunday lunch with us or stay the week-end or a few days, although our rates are low, a certain contribution will need to be made. In addition, they are expected to help with the work if they can. And keep up their own room, and when they leave render it clean and prepared for the subsequent guest. There are no distractions in or near the village of Gretz, except country pleasures. The ashrama is near a national forest where one can walk, and on sunny summer days just to sit in the park or go out with a basket to collect fruit or wild blackberries can be a special joy. If one is not interested in the chapel or the library or rural pleasures, a sojourn at Gretz can be mightily unexciting.

Some people come to Gretz because they are interested in Indian philosophy. They wish to know, in an academic fashion, more about the Vedas, the Upanishads, the writings of Shankara, the Bhagavad-Gita. The Center's library and the wisdom of Swami Ritajananda and Swami Veetamohananda are at their disposal.

Some are attracted by Sri Ramakrishna. The Face of Silence by Dhan Gopal Mukerjee is a popular book, and Romain Rolland's studies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have been in print for the past sixty years. Since the 1940's Jean Herbert's translations of the words of Sri Ramakrishna and some of Vivekananda's works have been available, and there are a number of other books and articles popularizing Ramakrishna Vedanta. A fantastic event happened in 1971 when the then popular magazine "Planete" published a whole issue on Sri Ramakrishna and organized a Ramakrishna festival

at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, attended by a capacity audience. We still receive letters from people saying that they had read about Gretz in "Planete" and would like to know more or would like to come and see what we do. Recently a similar response followed the publication of an article on the ashrama in the Dutch magazine "Prana". Although there has never been any organized campaign to popularize his name and personality, Sri Ramakrishna has become surprisingly well known in France and in Europe generally--even in the counties of the east..

Some, especially those who live in population-concentrated Paris, make the forty-minute trip to the ashrama primarily in search of space and fresh air.

Many come to profit from Gretz's "atmosphere". It is certainly true that a place where high thoughts have been thought and the Lord's name chanted for years and years develops a special ambiance that calms and heals. One feels it when one enters the gate, and it is strongest in the chapel--a little like that magnetic center pictured in the film "2001: A Space Odyssey". Many come just to sit a while in the chapel and feel better. Or talk with the swamis, whose calm and positiveness seem to make one's problems recede.

Then of course the Centre Védantique profits from the present popularity of yoga and the surge of enthusiasm for eastern thought. The Krishna Consciousness movement, the teachers of Transcendental Meditation, the writings of Alan Watts, the teachings of Krishnamurti, and the discourses of countless promenading paramahansas, rishis, matajis, lhamas, bonzes, and Zen masters have convinced large numbers that physical well-being and psychological equilibrium can be obtained through the practice of oriental techniques. Those human needs which once motivated people to attend mass and confession, to go on hazardous pilgrimages, now make many search answers in sessions of satsang, zazen, religious dance, and the performance of yoga postures, and other "New Age" activities. Or--and here we can be of some help--learn to meditate.

Desire to escape maya's plagues sends people to Gretz. Some of them decide, after a longer or shorter exposure to the ashrama, that Gretz is not for them, and they search alternatives elsewhere. I was astonished to learn recently that a newly launched organization in France, founded on the thought of Swami Muktananda, who had rarely, before his death in 1983, ever visited Europe, has thirty branches. The Krishna Consciousness movement, begun only thirty years ago, has vast estates scattered throughout Europe, and formerly had a thriving restaurant in the Halles district of Paris. Despite widespread criticism concerning its methods, this organization attracts thousands to its manifestations. Many additional examples could be listed. Whereas the Ramakrishna movement, working for fifty years in France, remains hardly larger than it was in Swami Siddheswarananda's day.

What is the reason? Dozens of hours preparing my Sunday afternoon lecture. As I dress in the traditional garua of the Indian sannyasin, preparatory to going to the auditorium, I look out the window, to see perhaps a half dozen autos in the drive, and when I arrive to give the lecture I am gratified to find an audience of seventy to ninety. It is roughly the same for all the Vedanta centers in the West. All may be said to be in a healthy condition; all have grown modestly over the years, but not one is what could be

called broadly popular. Swami Ritajananda and I have discussed this situation many times. We feel sometimes that Swami Yatiswarananda's labors in Europe before the War, Swami Siddheswarananda's twenty years of hard work, and now ours since the 1960's, seem to have been less popular than they should have been. Have we all failed in some way? If so, why and how?

Our analysis may be only a rationalization, but here it is. Sri Ramakrishna once said, "If you want discussion, go to Keshab. If you want God, come to me." Remaining true, a hundred years after the death of the founder, to the founder's insistence, the Ramakrishna movement in the West offers nothing but spiritual religion. Our emphasis is on change of character. We do not teach physical fitness or promise to open the path of success in business or romance; indeed this-worldly concerns are treated almost disdainfully. We organize no courses which, upon completion, insure superiority in some religious subject or confer competence to instruct others. Our leaders do not pretend to be repositories of secret truths; they do not try to appear charismatic. We don't organize, we don't promote, we don't convert, we seek no publicity. We discourage sectarianism, nip fanaticism in the bud. We often quote Swami Vivekananda's remark that it's good to be born in a church but undesirable to die there. Our one objective, as my guru expressed it, is to encourage those who come to us to become men and women of God. And we tend to let this transpire naturally, agreeing that nothing happens but at the right time.

Since we teach that all truth is in the individual and that he must find his own hell or heaven within himself, we do not attribute to ourselves any hold over the souls that come to us. Each is given the freedom to progress as he wishes. The Order does not allow gurus to emerge who may attract bands of blindly faithful, fanatical followers. The adherence of the devotee is stated to be not to an individual leader, not to the authority of the organization, but to the ideal.

This being our position, is it surprising that Ramakrishna Vedanta has not become a popular movement? Our manner of operating is too meditation-oriented to appeal to any but a spiritual minority. Considering our point of view, one has to conclude that it's amazing that as many people come to Gretz and remain faithful as do. At least this is how Swami Ritajananda and I console ourselves! Yes, as I said, some leave us. In that we offer little more than a moderately well heated hothouse where individuals can flourish only by putting forth some effort, this is not surprising.

I never felt that I was called to preach, nor do I feel that I am a very charismatic lecturer. Gone are those skills displayed as a drama student in high school and college. The Sunday when it is my turn to give the 15. 00 sermon is a miserable day for me, and the several days preceding it, during which I prepare the talk, make for an anxious week.

Something happened to me in 1948 which I have never forgotten. Trying to find what to do with myself when I first made the shift to Los Angeles, I went one day to a Christian minister for counseling. He was a prominent pastor of a big church on Wilshire Boulevard--which on arriving I observed possessed a gymnasium and sports center twice as large as its sanctuary. I put my problem very earnestly to him. But before I knew what was happening Reverend X turned the tables and was pouring out his problem to me! He said in distressed confession that he had come to feel unsure that he had chosen the correct

vocation; his faith had wavered. Yet he went on carrying on his ministerial activities with a great deal of assumed enthusiasm because he felt that he had to do so. But the conflict was heading him toward certain breakdown. What was he to do?

I excused myself and left, horribly embarrassed; nor have I forgotten that agonized man. I understand now, and admire his integrity. It is not a simple thing to be a religious teacher. Again and again Sri Ramakrishna warned against preaching unless one has a commission from God. This man was sincere enough to have discovered his lack and become upset by it. But he was imprisoned where he was, since his livelihood depended on keeping up the effort.

In my own case, although I have to give sermons frequently, I have always done so in terms of relaying what the scriptures, avatars, and saints have said, and contemporary devotees who have "succeeded". Never speaking as an authority. I am with the congregation as co-learner, co-inquirer. This is the only approach I know of for a man to take who is aware that he lacks a "commission" but is required to speak on religious topics before others. I have always eschewed any guru-like activities and even hesitate, when asked, to give advice on ordinary everyday matters of practical concern.

11.

It is observable that life in an ashrama is ever so much like the structure of a play, requiring a cast of characters which, with minor variations, are duplicated from center to center. All the stereotype components of drama are present--the hero or sage, perhaps a heroine or lady bountiful, a comedian for comic relief, a captain of the guard and a few sturdy soldiers, and a villain to muddy the waters or thicken the plot, hence make the action nove.

When one of our members complains about his role, I reply: "Be careful. Be thankful you are allowed to play the character you do play; be satisfied to play it well and try to play it even better, or the Lord may assign you another part, less attractive." And when one of our group criticizes another: "He is horrible; he is a troublemaker; he is bad," it is my habit to caution: "Watch out; all roles are required here, and if you concentrate too much on the seemingly undesirable actions of him you perceive as the villain, you may find yourself required to exchange places with hin."

I know. From juvenile lead in 1950, I was recast later for a while in the Hollywood drama as villain. Now I am satisfied to play, unglamorous as is the role, the sturdy soldier, or at best, a captain of the guard. Expand. Role of Swami as Shaman. Victim and comedian.

12.

Brian left in less than a year after I first arrived at Gretz. For a while we had no young men residents at all. The student manifestations of May, 1968, coincided with the fact that we had not yet planted the vegetable garden and could barely take care of the one cow we had at that time. I personally ran the motorized plow in an effort to turn the soil of at least a part of the vegetable garden so as to get

something sewn before the planting season was over. I wondered very seriously whether we should consider disposing of our big property and move to some other site more simple to manage. At this time, struggling with a depressing situation, I questioned what Ramakrishna really had in mind for the Centre Vřdantique Ramakrichna, and I asked him with all my heart to show us what his wishes were.

It must have been in late May or early June that Veno came. He was a blond young Hollander aged nineteen. He just walked in unannounced and said that he had come to stay.

"But we don't know you," I remonstrated. "Doesn't matter," he replied. "And if we say that you can't stay here?" "Doesn't matter," Veno replied again. "I have my sleeping bag and shall camp in the field."

We concluded that this was the answer from Ramakrishna we had asked for. Apparently he had sent this energetic young person just at this time when he was so badly needed. Veno not only quickly took over the care of the stable and the planting of the vegetable garden; he also contacted several friends in Holland, and soon we had an interesting band of young residents at Gretz, and the life of the ashrama as it is known today was established. Veno and friends started the musical program, and the album of ashrama songs which we published with the help of a devotee was the result of Veno's enthusiasm. It is Veno who composed the bhajan we sing every morning, "Hari Om, Ramakrishna". Although Veno went back to Holland after several years and established himself there as a householder, he never lost his love for the Center, and the Center never lost its appreciation for him. He told me the last time I saw him, "Whatever bad things I may do in this life, I know that Ramakrishna will be compassionate toward me, as the author of the bhajan in his name sung by the devotees every morning at Gretz."

But Veno was not a farmer any more than was anyone else. Our prairies were in deplorable condition, and the big field, capable of producing all the hay we needed, had remained uncultivated for years. So Ramakrishna expressed his support in a second event. In the autumn of that same year a very bedraggled young woman appeared at the door and said she wanted to stay in the ashrama. She seemed a hippy type, not very clean, and we were not at all inclined to accept her. But we permitted her to move in on a trial basis. We knew she was American, but otherwise she seemed disinclined to reveal anything about her background. Eventually, however, there were telephone calls from the United States, and shortly afterwards her father appeared. His purpose in coming to Gretz was to visit his daughter, but he quickly interested himself in our farming problems. He turned out to be a prominent agriculturist from Virginia. It was he who showed us the successful farm techniques which we have used every since, including what is called "stabulation libre" which provides us with compost; and the concept of cropping short the fields after the cows have eaten the grass, thereby enriching the prairies and reducing the reseeding of weeds. Not only showed us, but presented us with the farm equipment needed to do it, which we are using to this day--the John Deere tractor and accompanying machines.

As for myself, I see the protective hand of Ramakrishna in these developments. We had a problem about which we could do nothing. Yet somehow or other an unknown young man was inspired to come to us from another country, and an unknown and at first unwelcome young woman also, both instrumental in

saving an actual situation and pointing the way to the future. I see the intervention of Sri Ramakrishna in the solutions he provided; he promised to look after his devotees, and these were examples of how he fulfilled his promise. It is apparent that he does his own work; we do nothing beyond profiting from his concern, as his beneficiaries.

13.

Of the half-dozen members of the household who were here when I arrived in 1966, one has left, four have died, and the others have grown older. Three of the original women members continue to serve as "dedicated workers", and a fourth has joined in recent years. They are responsible for the cooking, for the chapel, for housework in the chateau and Sarada Mandir, for the laundry, for cultivation and care of flowers, and for personal service to Swami Ritajananda.

In addition there are generally four to five young men in the ashram.. They live as novices, giving their time and labor to the Center, in turn being sheltered and fostered there. They do most of the driving, property upkeep, chores relating to the farm and the vegetable garden, housekeeping in the Brahmananda Bhavan, some office work, and they help with food preparation and dishwashing.

In the case of these young men, they are given an opportunity to develop their character, and if they will, apply in due course to become members of the Ramakrishna Order. Four have taken brahmacharya at Belur Math, and of these, two have become swamis. We do not involve these young men in humanitarian activities--in the administration of schools, orphanages, hostels, medical services, or disaster relief activities, as is the case in India. We say that making the ashrama a well-ordered and attractive place where paying guests like to come for solace--that is their form of service; and doing that is their manner of earning their way and gaining a chance to develop their potential.

It is a routine life, monotonous, perhaps ill rewarded. They are constantly subjected to the interruptions and demands posed by guests. Yet if one remembers that "to serve My devotees is to serve Me", being a novice at Gretz can be a worthwhile experience.

But many do leave, and when that happens, I count it a personal loss. Oh, not always. Some don't stay long, some prove themselves ill-adapted to our ways, or come only as would-be escapist. But a novice who has stayed several years--his going is a traumatic experience for us.. Usually it is marriage and a normal life in the world which attracts them. Surely there is nothing wrong in that.

My dream was that we should build up a stable group of young men who would not only take responsibility for different phases of the work but would, as time passed, progress steadily to brahmacharya and sannyas, and take over as responsible associates personnel in the future.

But that is not at all what has happened. So I have had to conclude that Ramakrishna's will is otherwise. As "Manager-Maharaj" I have had to get along with constantly changing ashrama personnel, compensated for to some extent by the the very considerable aid rendered regularly by lay devotees.

Some of these week-end helpers have become invaluable in carrying forward certain parts of the work. Indeed a band of regular weekend aides carry out many duties which one would normally suppose would be the responsibility of those living in the house on a permanent basis. Our paucity of permanent live-in members has given such devotees opportunities for close identification with the Center which they could not have enjoyed otherwise.

Thus I have had to change my ideas as to what should be our mode of operation. I have had to conclude that Gretz, at least for the present, is destined to function as a sort of character-forming institute in which young persons enroll for longer or shorter periods, in order to be grounded in spiritual life, and from which they may depart equipped with some spiritual preparation. The equivalent, one might say, of the tradition in certain far-eastern countries where every young citizen dons the robe and carries the begging bowl of a Buddhist monk for a few months during the early period of his life.

And it is true that the foundation Gretz gives them serves well our "graduates". Those who have lived with us have not only gained a spiritual base for their life; they have also become witnesses for Vedanta to a population ignorant of spiritual subjects, as they pursue their lives as householders and in business. They have perhaps a larger influence as lay people than have the novices who follow their round of activities exclusively at the ashrama. They are convincing interpreters of the meaning of Sri Ramakrishna. One of our "old boys" went on to a brilliant career in a university, where he originated a new system of psychology based on Vedantic principles. Another is an international businessman, who has frequent occasions to demonstrate before other professional persons the therapeutic value of meditation. A third is a marionettist, whose puppets communicate to the children in his audiences themes taken from Indian wisdom.

My regret over the departure of some of these young men has been compensated for by the satisfaction I feel in knowing that they have done so well since their departure from the Centre. Here are extracts from letters I received from two of them:

Dearest Swami,

Please excuse me for being a month late in replying to you, but be sure that I am very happy to know you are going to visit me. Now it is not me, but us, for I have married a girl named X. She already knows you, since I have spoken often about the months passed at Gretz--which remain for me the moments the most fruitful of my life.

A great thankfulness pours from my heart, for you awoke in me something fundamental--making me conscious of the real life, and the discovery of the Lord, who would change our lives. In addition, you were a great comfort during those moments when I had to go through difficult situations; I shall never forget Gretz.

May this encourage you to continue your mission for those young people who pass some time at Gretz. My prayer to the Lord is that he will keep you in good health and keep you

safe in his arms.

My wife and I are now taking an active interest in the Catholic church, where we are trying to consecrate our lives to Jesus Christ. I always refused to think of the Centre Védantique as a sect, but instead as a place where I discovered the faith.

Dear Swamis,

The real reason why I write you is this: I should like to express the appreciation I have for you and the Center. I left the Center about four years ago and there hasn't been a single moment when my faith in Ramakrishna has weakened. I have seen that the struggles in the world are present in order to bring us closer to the Lord and to you. My life at Gretz and the contact with you brought me a treasure of great value, a source of peace, a direction, a way, an objective, a comfort, and happiness--in Ramakrishna.

Hence I should like to tell you, a bit in the name of all those who came to Gretz and who gained from your presence and who left the Center, that your work and your pains and the difficulties we made for you have brought us the greatest benediction, the sentiment of belonging to Ramakrishna.

I ask you, thus, to have confidence in us--in A., B., C., D., E., F., and so forth--that we will live a life worthy of the grace you have extended in helping us to be good children of Sri Ramakrishna.

My thanks to you.

I make a practice of keeping in touch with these "old boys". I have visited several of them in their homes, meeting their wives, dangling their children on my knee. A little sad for what they might have become, but nonetheless very proud of them, every one.

14.

There is a certain subject which I have not mentioned anywhere previously in this book because I never wanted to give it much importance. But yet it cannot be ignored. Being a Vedantist in the West, and a swami, involves certain disadvantages. I have been subjected to discrimination because of such Indian connections, and in one case ostracism.

To a mild degree criticism from my own Protestant, Yankee family; that is to be expected. But also on the part of ordinary, reasonable folk with whom I have contacts, whose good opinion, whose cooperation, may be considered important. The questionable activities in the Occident of some religious leaders of oriental background who direct groups easily mistaken as being like ours, and the outcry everywhere against "the sects", have made difficulties for me. I have already spoken of the equivocal

attitude of the citizens of our village. When I travel my unaccustomed name confounds reservation agents and hotel clerks.

"What is your name?"

"Swami Vidyatmananda."

"What?"

"Just say Mr. Swami."

"All right, Mr. Swami. And what is the first name?"

A well-known scandal surrounding a swami in Switzerland caused a devotee who lives in Zurich to avoid introducing me to her friends when I visited her there. And the ugly publicity concerning the behavior of an Indian leader operating in America was the probable reason why several influential citizens of Saas-Fee, who had originally been enthusiastic to know of Swami Vivekananda's visit to their village in 1896 suddenly refused further friendship. Apparently they feared I intended to dispoil the purity of their Swiss respectability by trying to turn Saas-Fee into a pilgrin center for fanatical Swamiji followers, perhaps even intending to rename it Vivekanandapuram!

In addition, one of the occupational hazards of being a "holy man" is that one's status invites scandal. Swami Prabhavananda often remarked: "It is strange, but if someone endeavors to live a pure life, others like to attack him. This happens in all churches and religious associations." The source seems often to be a woman of what the French call "a certain age," usually endowed with a sufficiency of money and an insufficiency of emotional fulfillment in her life. Prabhavananda went on to say: "It follows practically the same pattern everywhere. Either the sadhu is accused of being not right as concerns women, or if not that, then as concerns men, or if not that, then as concerns money."

It never occurred to me that suspicions of this ugly sort should ever be leveled at me. But at times I have received anonymous letters, or overheard gossip, accusing me of illicit relations with one or the other of the sexes, and at times both! As far as I know, I haven't yet been accused of looseness in money matters.

This sort of defamation of character is difficult to accept and next to impossible to counteract; and it really hurts. And yet, I said to myself, how many doubts I have entertained about others, including some sadhus, probably as wrongly as those which were being circulated about me. If I so gloried in impinging the character of others--probably absolutely mistakenly--why should I feel so pained when others should do the same to me?

15.

What, then, have my years at the Centre Vřdantique Ramakrichna meant to me?

It was my good fortune that this opportunity was permitted me. I sometimes console myself with the thought that my determination to quit Los Angeles--agonizing as that was--was "meant to be" since it forced me to transfer to Gretz, to take up a new role in a new country under new leadership, where new

learning experiences were to become available. A stage which began with sadness and qualms but grew satisfactory. And I am told that my presence at Gretz has been a plus factor for the ashrama.

I had always felt myself more old-world than new. That is to say, more of a reserved English type than a brash American. Certainly, however, never French. It was another of Ramakrishna's pranks to send me not to Britain, where I could have settled in easily, but to France whose language I couldn't speak and whose culture--so un-British, so un-American--I would have to learn to adapt to.

But how gratifying it all proved to be!

Slowly, steadily getting the Center's property in order has been a gratifying occupation. The domain will never merit entry in guidebooks as an outstanding example of French architecture or landscaping, but the houses have become harmonious and functional, and the park beautiful in a natural sort of way. The financial condition too has become adequate to our needs.

And, to my astonishment, I have become an enthusiastic farmer. The birth of a new calf is an exciting event. Our annual harvest of 250 kilos of honey and twelve thousand eggs per year are matters of importance. The making and distribution of compost holds interest for me. A wet summer interfering with the orderly production of hay is a matter of concern, while a dry spell affecting the great vegetable garden and the orchard makes me anxious. I take pride in large pumpkins. And when in winter we eat our own strawberries or raspberries earlier picked and frozen, and our devotees exclaim: "How good they are, not like you buy, but so natural," my heart warms. I watch the seasons from the first appearance of crocuses to the falling of the last leaves from our dozens of trees and ponder during all the days of leaf-raking on the rhythm of nature--like any other country person. Yes, even too hot a sun, too glaring a light, displeases me now. Lower skies, a light drizzle as seen in some Japanese prints, manifest for me their own sort of beauty.

Swami Vivekananda's motto for us, "For one's own good and for the good of the world" has been my inspiration. "For the good of the world" for us means placing the message of Vedanta at the disposal of all who would like to learn of it. We have done our best with that aspect. Our membership has risen from 23 in 1966 to more than 250 today. Our bookshop has expanded. Our French quarterly "Vĕdanta" has come out regularly for the past twenty-five years. We have translated a good deal of recent Vedanta literature and published several books. And I have taken my turn as frequently as demanded in "exposing", as the French say, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ideas in writing and in lectures. Individual spiritual instruction, needless to say, I have always left to Swami Ritajananda. A gratifying project was investigating and writing up the activities of Swami Vivekananda in Europe, as I have elsewhere explained.

As for "one's own good", I have been forced to live the life of a sadhu at Gretz. Being a swami implies a real responsibility: it makes one highly visible. Being a swami means first and foremost curbing one's self-assurance--so apt to mislead--and placing one's reliance upon God. This has meant reining in my preemptory nature, marking time on certain projects sometimes for years, until permission to start comes

from itself, learning to "let things work out", learning to rely on Sri Ramakrishna.

It has meant, too, letting God take responsibility for the problem which has always plagued us at Gretz, of an insufficiency of household members. To keep such a big place going and essential services uninterrupted on the basis of unskilled and volunteer help is not easy. As I explained earlier in this chapter, we can count only on helpers who appear of their own accord and stay because it pleases them to stay. And only too often no sooner does a novice learn a job and begin to ease our burden than he decides to leave, and the whole responsibility has to be taken up and retaught once again. If I can say that I have suffered, I shall say that I have suffered because of this. But I have learned to live with this hazard. Accepting this form of disorder at Gretz has been my principle austerity and one I suppose I needed to practice. Some probationers and several devotees have been difficult to manage, and I have suffered at their hands. But I have to say that somehow or other when one aide leaves another comes, and we have never experienced the serious crises which I periodically feared.

It is so curious that anyone seeking order and privacy, as I constitutionally always have, should be thrust into a career in which order is always escaping and a hearty extraversion is mandatory. Ordering my life like this, I accept, is another of Ramakrishna's games.

I try never to forget that a sadhu is perforce a model whether he chooses to be or not. The only moral education I believe in is teaching through example. So I have forced myself to go to the chapel regularly no matter how I felt, day in and day out, year after year, to use my time profitably, to remain cheerful, to put a positive face on things, and to give an example of willing service to guests and devotees. I have fought a battle with my willful temperament so as to operate with patience, and against my aggressive personality, to learn to be maleable. I have tried to appropriate the qualities discerned in the gurus and upagurus I have been fortunate to know--descriptions of whom form Chapter Twelve and conclude this book.

Any American tends to think of Europe as a potentially dangerous area of the world, subject to repeated war and destruction. In contrast, America has traditionally been regarded as a haven of safety, although in today's world of intercontinental arms the distinction may no longer be valid. I have often asked myself whether, if war were to seriously threaten Europe, I would abandon Gretz and betake myself if I could to the sanctuary of the land where I was born and whose citizen I still am. And to this I say no. The devotees of Gretz are my relatives, fellow members of the Ramakrishna caste, and Gretz is my post. If big trouble were to come, I am sure I should prefer to stay and face the consequences with my own.

For we are not here just for the present. The Center VĀdāntique Ramakrishna will be here long after I am gone, and "my boys" will be here too--at least some of them--occupying the posts, carrying the responsibilities, that are mine now. I have no children of my own, no domain of my own. But like a fond paterfamilias, or founder of a dynasty, I gain joy from what I've helped to foster: these descendants, this domain, and all that goes to make up the good life of an ashrama. Successors to Swami Ritajananda will come from India as President and take over. New "manager-maharajs" may come from America or better yet will originate in different countries of Europe, reared up in Gretz. It is enough to know that

people sensing in their hearts a passion to become men and women of God will find waiting for them at Gretz a setting and the procedures conducive to their search.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Eleven

The Devotee As Aide to a Holy Man

1.

Swami Ritajananda was born on 9 December, 1906, in Mylapore, Madras. He is from an orthodox South Indian brahmin family, his forebears having been temple priests. His father's name was T.P. Narayanaswamy and his mother was called Visalakshmi.. His mother died when he was twelve, and he went to live with his grandfather--a disciplinarian so restrictive that the boy decided--as he told me once--to be as permissive toward others when he grew up as his grandfather had been severe toward him. He seems to have been a shy youth, perhaps rather lonely, and convinced that he was not particularly attractive to others. He felt sure that the acquaintances he made were likely to find him uninteresting and were bound sooner or later to drop him.

He thus became rather defensive and developed a hesitancy to commit himself for fear of being disappointed. He turned into a bookish, solitary, self-contained person. He kept his thoughts as well as his emotions to himself. He learned early to keep his own counsel, not to reveal his true feelings; this quality manifested itself in later life as an admirable self-possession.

From his earliest days the future Swami Ritajananda admired English literature and was interested, also, in French books and writers. He read Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo in English translation when he was in his teens. He attended the University of Andhra, where he specialized in mathematics. At Madras he associated with monks of the Sri Ramakrishna Math at Mylapore, including Swami Yatiswarananda and Swami Siddheswarananda, both of whom, curiously, were to be his predecessors in Europe.

In 1931 at the age of twenty-five, on the birthday of Sri Rama, the future Swami Ritajananda arrived at Belur Math to join the Order of Sri Ramakrishna. His father opposed this move and appealed to the authorities of Belur Math for the return of his son; but the postulant vigorously rejected all such appeals, even warning his father that he would take up the life of an anonymous, itinerant sadhu if the authorities at Belur Math rejected him because of the disapproval of his family. He obtained his diksha initiation from the then President, Swami Shivananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. He took brahmacharya in 1936 from Swami Akhandananda, another direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and sannyas in 1940 from Swami Virajananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

Being a novice in a busy monastery in Bengal was very different from being a student in comfortable circumstances in South India. The food was foreign to him, and the language had to be learned. (Always interested in languages, he soon mastered Bengali; he already knew Sanskrit and English, as well as Tamil and Telegu. Later he was to learn Sinhalese while serving in the Ramakrishna Mission in Sri Lanka, and, after 1961, French.) The Bengali temperament is as distinct from that of the South Indian's as is, say, the Mediterranean personality from that of members of the Nordic nations. During his early

years in the Order, thus, that same sensation of alienation known from his youngest days persisted.

During the period when he was a brahmachari Swami Ritajananda worked as a school teacher at the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith in Deoghar, Bihar, where he taught mathematics. During the war years he headed the Ramakrishna Mission school system in Sri Lanka, which consisted of several schools and an institution for orphans; it was a period of privation due to food and other shortages. In 1946 he was appointed proctor of the great Vivekananda Students' Home in Madras, where he remained till 1954. This large institution comprises a technical school, a high school, and a hostel. Academic work always appealed to the Swami. He is a natural teacher and likes young people. Former students from Deoghar, from Colombo, and from Madras continue to keep in touch with him.

2.

In 1954 Swami Nikhilananda requested Swami Ritajananda's presence in New York as assistant minister of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, 17 E. 94th Street. Having few duties there other than giving class talks weekly and occasional Sunday lectures, the Swami was able to read widely and start work on a biography of Swami Turiyananda. This was published in English in 1962 and in French in 1979. He also had time for friendships, and began to become known among the congregation as someone ready to listen to one's problems or just be companionable. It was thus that Swami Ritajananda began to exercise his extraordinary talent for friendship. That old sensation of considering himself an outsider disappeared. He told me that at a certain point--I don't know when this was--he had decided to see how many friends he could acquire! This process began in earnest in New York. The Swami had developed a sunny, permissive personality; one sensed that one could tell him anything and that he would be interested. Moreover he would not judge or condemn, and he would keep one's confidences. Unassertive in most fields of activity, he often takes a strong lead in attracting and cultivating new contacts. He is especially interested in those individuals having adjustment problems: the misfits, the friendless, the inept. His early problems thus fitted him to understand and sympathize with others. And how they do respond to his advances! Here he is assertive. I once told him he was a obsessive collector of wounded birds!

In New York Swami Ritajananda never assumed any of the prerogatives of a guru--traditionally exercised only by the head of the center. But perhaps his easy popularity with the devotees displeased his superior. In any case, Swami Nikhilananda requested his replacement. Thus in 1959 Swami Ritajananda was transferred to the Vedanta Society of Southern California as temporary, second assistant minister, the first assistant minister being Swami Vandanananda, who later returned to India to become for a time General Secretary of the Order.

One suspects that Swami Ritajananda was hurt by his dismissal from the New York work, but he never said so. He never talked about it at all, and certainly never expressed public criticism of Swami Nikhilananda. The quality of not criticizing is firmly established as a part of his personality. When someone does something clearly unwise or obviously wrong, Swami Ritajananda's usual observation is: "But he's like that, that's his nature. What can he do ?" And then he will probably add, "But he will surely change." That's the final line of the few negative assessments of people I have heard the Swami

utter: "He will suffer from the course he is taking and that will force him to change."

How many times I have heard those words from him: "He (or she) will surely change." He never really looks at people according to the weaknesses that they manifest at the given time. Rather he considers them as, certainly not bad, but merely immature. He believes in the future spiritual success of everybody he comes in contact with; and it is this belief in them that attracts so many people to him.

Devotees from New York followed Swami Ritajananda to Southern California or kept in close touch with him by mail. And he made many new friends in Hollywood. By now receiving and answering letters was becoming a major part of his schedule. This "problem" of correspondance kept augmenting. In the 1980's at Gretz he was receiving ten or twelve letters a day, often long and complicated recitations of personal problems, and of course expressed in several different languages. Once he pointed out the stack of unanswered correspondance and confessed that he was overwhelmed by it. I reminded him: "But Swami, don't forget that you told me that you had once decided to acquire as many friends as possible. Here is the result!" I must add that his conscientiousness in responding to needs expressed is remarkable. Even boring people or those with difficult handwriting or those of clearly unstable personality receive his positive attention. Noticing the flood of correspondance waiting to be answered, I asked on another occasion what it was that all these people wrote about. His answer was: "It's very simple. They want to tell somebody something that's important to them and assume that that something is interesting to the person to whom they are writing. So I try to reply, even a few lines. Generally not giving advice, but just being friendly and encouraging. It gives them comfort." I have thus a daily object-lesson of what Swami Prabhavananda tried to inculcate in me and which I have been slow to learn. I can hear him still in that insistent, tender tone: "Feel for others, my child. You must learn to feel for others."

3.

In 1961, as I have said, Swami Ritajananda was appointed President of the Centre VĀdāntique Ramakrichna at Gretz, France. The old process continued. Old New York friends came to visit when they could, as did the more recent friends from Hollywood, or continued to write regularly. And gradually there were established contacts throughout all of Europe.

At first the situation for the new leader was very difficult. I have described the troubles of this period in Chapter Ten. To someone who had long contended with the problem of rejection, what occurred at this period was very difficult indeed. As I said, I visited Gretz in the summer of 1964 and found Swami Ritajananda in a dejected mood. He even expressed the fear that the Centre might slowly waste away. Twenty-five years later, of course, such fears show themselves to have been unfounded.

Swami Ritajananda took his elevation to Head-of-Center modestly. He was now empowered to give initiations, and over the years he was to make many disciples. In addition to giving counsel by correspondance he now began to receive people in interviews, so much so that as the years passed he gained a reputation in Europe as a sort of wise man or seer from whom one could solicit advice on almost any aspect of human or divine behavior. He became the recipient of widespread adulation. But he

never accepted such marks of reverence as meant for himself. He deflected them to Sri Ramakrishna. I never heard him use the word "initiation" in connection with his activities, nor did I ever know of him referring to someone as his disciple. Rather he would say that X had asked for a mantra or that Y had come to be thrown at the feet of the Lord. "Only God is guru. I have done what was expected of me-- now let Sri Ramakrishna do his job."

Of course occasionally close devotees have grown indifferent and have left. But now there is a confidence and an assurance of success which keep him from taking these defections badly, certainly not as disloyal actions or as rebuffs. The early fear of betrayal seems thus to have been entirely surmounted. "Why yes, they may find what they are looking for elsewhere. We have done what we could. It is good for them to try elsewhere."

In matters of administration I have rarely seen Swami Ritajananda initiate any action or departure on his own. He much prefers that someone else act as agent. Often he seems not to know what he wants, and this lack of decision sometimes baffles his assistants. One supposes that, in these cases, he is waiting to learn the will of God. Or it may be that he is diplomatically waiting for an intended course of action to show itself acceptable to all concerned, for a consensus to emerge. When there appears a conjunction of all elements, one may consider that the proposed action is indicated and should be undertaken.

This, when I arrived in Gretz in 1966, was a type of personality I had never before worked with. How different this approach was from Lyle Spencer's aggressive drive and Prabhavananda's assertiveness! I was baffled by the Swami's silence, by the fact that he was often so non-committal. He didn't tell me what to do, although since I was at that time still of an enterprising nature and rather brash, he quietly cautioned me, as non-French and a newcomer, as to several things not to do. He didn't seem to depend on me, didn't have any preconceptions of what my functions were to be, almost made me feel as though he didn't actually need me; but I was welcome to stay in Gretz if the situation suited me. The ashrama wasn't "his" place: it was the Lord's. I was given no responsibilities, no special status. "Let us see what the Lord wants" was the answer to everything. I had come to Gretz on a year's trial basis; so I went to Swami Ritajananda on the closing day of that first year and asked him if my performance had been satisfactory and if I should continue. Blandly he took no position on the question at all. "Who am I to answer that? I'm nobody here." I should do what seemed best to me. Of course I stayed.

It is not my purpose to talk about myself in this description of Swami Ritajananda. But because I have worked closely with him for many years and have found my own character changed and my outlook modified by the contact, I can perhaps describe him most effectively by making personal references to his effect upon me.

As a person habituated to direct lines of commands and to business methods, I was unused to the non-directive mode of operating which Swami Ritajananda followed, finding it extremely disquieting. I was unmanned by this, to me, inscrutable attitude for years. The place I was eventually to occupy at the ashrama formulated itself naturally as duties others had abandoned fell upon me, or as I saw the need to take up projects no one else cared about. It was a tactful fashion for a newcomer and foreigner to

become integrated into the work. But in the early years I had a hard time accepting the fluidity of the situation.

Even to this day Swami has never uttered a word of appreciation. He's never expressed satisfaction with my work, never said thank you. It took me years not to be hurt by this and to understand it. "Who am I to praise or blame? It's not I for whom anyone is working. You do what you do for the Lord and for your own development. I won't make ours a business arrangement." This evidence of confidence now seems more valuable to me than would utterances of the usual kind of routine thanks.

Try as I did, I could never manage to involve Swami in personal or vocational problems. Any complaint was turned aside blandly: "Moods change." His policy when he was himself scolded or complained against was to remain silent. Just to sit silently until the other had run out of words. No self-defense, just silence. This response had the effect of disarming the assailant and finally forcing him to desist, defeated. Swami is thus hard to quarrel with. Once, however, when I was really irritated about something he had done I made up my mind to "have things out" with him. He listened in silence to my angry words and then answered calmly: "You know you are angry. So your reason is disturbed. We'll wait a little while for the emotion to go, and then we'll discuss the matter like the good friends we are."

I see now that only a modest and wise man could act in the ways I have described. The early discomposure I felt has turned into admiration. I have tried to learn to follow the same mode of behavior myself. "Be patient, be positive, and let things work out." "Who can tell what is good, what is ultimately bad, what is progress, what is success? It all depends." "Don't get excited. There are so many criteria; spiritual unfoldment is too subtle to analyze. Who knows how God works? Who knows what God wants?" Could this mode of operating be called spiritual improvisation?

For Swami Ritajananda the purpose of religion, as I have indicated, is to produce a change in the individual who practices it--a change of character, a change in his habitual reactions, a fundamental change in that person's very thought patterns. A genuinely spiritual man or woman is one who has learned to live at peace with himself, who lives in peace with others, and who copes competently with the vagaries of the everyday world in which human beings are forced to live. The Swami is not impressed by claims made concerning mystical experiences or celestial emotions when not accompanied by a corresponding amelioration in the individual's life style. Have you become a mature person? would be his question. Spiritual practice, properly applied, should transform an individual into something of a sage. And the means of reaching this state is meditation, steadily, relentlessly practiced.

Despite his commitment to the non-directive mode of operation, Swami Ritajananda has succeeded in bringing into being numerous positive developments in ashrama procedures. Shortly after he arrived he initiated the construction of an auditorium for the Sunday lectures; these had previously been given in the rather inadequate public rooms of the main house. In 1968 the Swami began to give a class on the Bhagavad-Gita at 6 Place des Etats-Unis, Paris, the residence where Swami Vivekananda had stayed as the guest of the Leggetts in 1900. This bimonthly class was continued regularly over a period of seven years. In 1976 the Center published a new version of the Bhagavad-Gita which the Swami had translated

directly into French from the Sanskrit, and in 1986 he brought out a book on meditation. The quarterly revue "VĀdanta", begun in 1966, continued to appear regularly. He has undertaken the translation of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna from the original Bengali directly into French.

During all these years Ritajananda has traveled widely in the main countries of Western Europe, meeting with people individually or in groups. These contacts gradually swelled the number of friends wishing to make retreats at Gretz, thus rendering the Centre VĀdantique Ramakrishna a very flourishing and truly international religious community. Thus have been planted the seeds which will surely sprout one day into full-fledged Vedanta centers in Germany, Italy, Spain, and other European countries.

There was, however, one project concerning which Swami Ritajananda took from the beginning a strong position. He felt that the Center should have a proper meditation hall. The chapel established by Swami Siddheswarananda was adapted from a former bedroom on the top floor of the main house. In the early days of the work in France a certain discretion was considered indispensable. Only intimate devotees were permitted to know of the existence of the chapel and to have access to it. With the change of attitude toward meditation and the coming of Swami Ritajananda, any visitor interested in attending a meditation session or a religious office is permitted to go to the chapel. Thus the old chapel soon proved itself to be inadequate. Swami Ritajananda aspired always that there should be an suitable locale expressly designed for meditation. But during many years there simply was not enough money to consider building such a structure. But the determination to produce a new chapel never left the Swami's mind, and by the year of his twenty-fifth anniversary as leader of the Centre VĀdantique Ramakrishna the project could finally be realized. The new facility serves well the devotees and remains a monument to Swami Ritajananda's steady belief in the transforming power of meditation.

4.

Having observed at close hand the application of what has been called the directive and nondirective methods of operating in a center, I conclude that the nondirective approach is superior. It is slow, aggravating, and demands a high degree of commitment from those applying it. But for any leader or manager trying to pursue a spiritual objective, attempting to work purely for the spiritual benefit of those he is responsible for, I believe that the nondirective method is preferable.

The technique is simply to stand back and "let the Lord work things out". Where the directive method is employed, there exists a subtle danger that when one makes and imposes a decision one may be, without knowing it, expressing an impulse coming from one's own wishes, prejudices, or will. Not being all-knowing--as the Lord is--one may be making a mistake. My own doubts began at Science Research Associates long ago when confronted with the uncertainties inherent in what was referred to as human engineering. In all active human situations more variables are involved than the human mind can take account of, and before a therapist can achieve results the variables tend to increase in number and change their character. I can recall examples where courses of action I was sure were indicated were subsequently shown to be, if carried out, clearly erroneous. As I have watched the working out of the nondirective style over two and a half decades, my conclusion is that it gives results no less effective

than those reached where the style of leadership is more aggressive; and probably ultimately better for all from a spiritual standpoint.

Of course this is a debatable subject. An impressive example of gratuitous goodness is given in Section 9 of Chapter Twelve where I speak of the "non-hissing" proclivities of Swami A. The reader is directed to this passage.

5.

There is an Indian expression which runs like this: "God is at the disposal of his devotees." Quite an idea. Years of observation have shown me that a genuine guru or holy man is equally at the disposal of any seeker who wishes to "take advantage" of him. He is a hostage to his own commitment, victim of his own goodness, prisoner of love--of his own impersonal compassion--that which Buddhist writers term the Great Compassion. Well, God can take it, but the poor earthly guru is only a man!

Some observers might believe that being a guru is an enviable lot. All that adulation, all those gifts!. But no. That's the least part of it, and a negligible part, since no genuine guru accepts such marks of esteem as due to him personally. One recalls Shakespear's masterly treatment of Henry V's meditations as he, the King, disguised, walked among his soldiers in the night before the battle at Harfleur: "What infinite heart's ease must kings neglect that private men enjoy!" It's the comfort-station duties, the emergency-ward responsibilities which cost. The long letters to be read and responded to encouragingly, the interviews replete with tedious details of the disciple's resentments and regrets, the sheer childishness of attitudes of the interviewee, the advice he is implored to give, often on matters purely secular. The embarrassing revelations he must listen to, the trouble-making potentialities of the unstable and the mad, that he must defuse. Yes, and the denunciations he must face from disciples who temporarily or permanently choose to change their allegiance.

God is at the entire disposal of his devotee. The corollary to that is that the holy man or guru, performing as he should, is indeed more godlike than he or we can possibly comprehend.

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Chapter Twelve

The Devotee as Witness to Evidences of the Faith

1.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as everyone knows. And the proof of devotion is that devotion makes a difference in peoples' lives, that--as Swami Ritajananda said, people do improve, and that--as Swami Prabhavananda affirmed: "It works my child. I tell you that it really does work."

Witnessing this type of success is convincing. It reassures us that our aspiration has not been misplaced.

Throughout the previous eleven chapters, I have mentioned, according to the context of the subject, individuals who have impressed me as examples of Vedanta in practice. There remain several additional devotees whose stories I wish to recount, whose histories provide evidences of the effectiveness of the faith. A pleasantly varied lot of devotees they are, consisting of a society woman, a professor, two stenographers, an inventor, a researcher, an architect, a countess, and two swamis.

2.

Her name was Mme. Alice Nixon. She was the mother of one of the nuns in our convent at Santa Barbara. Nixon is a name fairly common in the United States. Mme Alice Nixon, about whom I shall now discourse, was not related in any way to the former President of the United States, Richard Nixon. Later, when she became a devotee Swami Prabhavananda gave her the name of Tarini--one of the names of the Divine Mother. Tarini was born rather poor, in Tennessee. In other words, she came from what is generally referred to as an undistinguished background. But as a young woman she possessed remarkable beauty and a very sharp mind. She had wit and charm. Tarini is an encouraging example of someone who had decided all by herself to expand her horizons. And she did just that, relying on nothing but her intelligence, audaciousness, and most of all, courage.

Here is an example of Tarini's courage--or if you prefer--audaciousness. During the latter part of her life she was interested in gardening. One day she went with friends to visit the famous Biltmore Gardens near Asheville, North Carolina. She happened to arrive on a day when the gardens were closed; naturally the gardian refused to let her enter. Tarini had cultivated a royal manner; drawing herself up with an imperious air, she whipped out her calling card and in a commanding tone declared: "Mr. Nixon will not be pleased with your refusal." This was at the time when Richard Nixon was Vice President. Naturally the gardian, not daring to take the risk of upsetting a relative of the Vice President, opened the gate. Tarini and her friends were able to visit the gardens in agreeable privacy.

She obtained quite often tickets to popular plays for which all the places had long been reserved by appearing at the ticket office well dressed and haughty just before the curtain was to go up, insisting that

a ticket had been set aside for her by some personage whose name unnerved the clerk in the ticket office.

Before I came to know her in Los Angeles in about 1950, Tarini had passed many years in Europe. Before that, back in Tennessee, there had been a marriage to a prosaic local type, and she had had two daughters. Fed up with life in her dull American environment, and fearing that her daughters would have little in the way of advantages, Tarini decided quite early to leave her husband and take her daughters to Europe. There she lived, literally, on her wits and her beauty. She was welcome everywhere because she was so interesting--or to use a word often applied in describing her--outrageous. She was decorative, she was fun, and her presence made parties successful. The daughters went to good schools and obtained a sophisticated veneer; they almost forgot English and that they were Americans.

Tarini told me one day how it had all begun to come to an end. One winter she was at St. Moritz for the skiing. The young man who was her companion quite innocently and admiringly observed: "Mon dieu, you must have been a beautiful woman."

"His use of the past tense," Tarini told me, "gave me a shock. I realized in a flash that the life I had lived was now over and that I should turn to concerns of more importance."

Tarini came back to the United States and began to study Vedanta, first out of curiosity and later with a real hunger. At the Vedanta Society of Southern California she was a familiar figure at all the functions, smartly dressed in her now dŽmodŽ robes from once famous French designers, every inch the great matron, and speaking always French to anyone who knew the language even slightly. Her motto was: "I prefer that others should say, 'There she goes' rather than 'Who is she?'" She also used to quote Lady Mendl: "Never complain, never explain."

At the end of his class talks on Thursday evenings Swami Prabhavananda generally asked for questions from the congregation. If there was an awkward silence with no one daring to speak up, Tarini would get things started by asking the first question--often a question which seemed to the audience that didn't know her irreverent or provocative. Yes, she stirred up things! At once an air of excitement was produced and the question period would turn out to be very interesting indeed.

She had studied somewhere, perhaps in Japan, the gentle art of flower arranging. Hence it was Tarini's privilege to prepare the decorations for any special occasion at the Center. These arrangements were spectacular, in fact as audacious as she was--so much so that it was sometimes said that the flower arrangements were so overwhelming at dinners that there was hardly room for the guests, let alone for the food!

I give all these worldly details in order to prepare for the dŽnoument of this story, of how a woman so apparently frivolous and egoist should become a solid devotee and inspire in me the faith that God knows the heart and responds to the inner condition rather than to outward appearances.

For now Tarini fell sick with cancer. She didn't mention it for a long time, going on in her animated way

as always. One evening she accompanied me to a concert at the famous Hollywood Bowl. She was smartly dressed as usual, and wore high-heeled shoes. The Hollywood Bowl is about a kilometer's distance from the Vedanta center, and once there in that huge outdoor stadium one is obliged to climb a good many steps to reach one's seat. We walked both ways, Tarini chatting gaily all the time. It was only later that I realized what an effort that evening must have cost her.

Instead of saying anything about her malady and her imminent demise, Tarini took up the study of the then new subject of gerontology--the science of age and aging. She began to discuss with her usual animation with other devotees the phenomena of aging, terminal illness, and death. These exposés, rendered like pleasant conversation, were Tarini's means for letting her friends know that she was approaching her end.

And I suspect that it was also through this method that Tarini herself came to terms with the idea of her death. It was light, it was charming, it was decorative. But when it eventually became apparent that she was suffering from something grave, she began to speak openly of her condition. With the same audacity with which she had conducted her worldly life, she began to attach herself firmly to the Divine. She attacked meditation and japam in the same fashion that she had attacked the difficulties of life--with faith and determination. I suspect that God found her as amusing as everyone else always had. I suspect that her very audaciousness, her outrageousness, appealed to the Divine and forced him, as was the case at the Biltmore Gardens long before, to throw wide open the gate.

I went to see her several days before her death. Of course physically Tarini was but a broken shadow of her former self. But she was as animated as always, conversing about the destination that was awaiting her only a few days away as though she were preparing for a trip to visit amusing society people in Venice or Rome.

Tarini died at the Sarada Convent at Santa Barbara, surrounded by the nuns, the most affected being her daughter who had always felt slightly embarrassed by her mother's exaggerated nature, but now grateful for it. The nuns chanted throughout her last hours the names of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. Tarini joined in as long as she could.

Certain persons who knew the old Tarini remarked: "If Tarini can succeed, by golly, then there is hope for me!" I believe that that would have been an obituary of which she would have heartily approved.

3.

The time is Christmas Eve, 1963. The place is the great temple of Sri Ramakrishna at Belur Math on the Ganges. In a few days the final and most important celebrations marking the centenary of the birth of Swami Vivekananda are to take place. Swamis, brahmacharis, and devotees have traveled to the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission from all parts of India. From other places in the Far East, from Europe, and from America additional visitors have come. On the evening of which I write, many of these people are assembled in the temple for the annual worship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A temporary altar has been set up in the nave of the temple at right angles to the shrineroom. All afternoon the brahmacharis of the Belur Math Training Center, assisted by students from nearby Ramakrishna schools, have been busy decorating this altar. Many kinds of food, especially dishes assumed to be popular in the Christian West, have been set out as offerings: fruit cake, Coca Cola, and a cigar. In the center of the altar stands a beautiful colored picture of the Madonna and Child.

My eyes are drawn to this picture. For I have heard the story of where it came from and why it is here. "The picture of Christ they were using at Belur Math was small and not very well printed. I decided that, while passing through Europe on the way home, I would purchase the finest print I could obtain, of a good painting of the Madonna and Child; and I would send it to Belur Math for their Christmas worship." This is what Dorothy Mercer had told me in Hollywood after her return from India in 1959.

Now I am at Belur Math, and there before me is Dorothy's gift on the Christmas shrine. And Dorothy is dead. She never saw, will never see, in its place of honor, the present she gave. Dorothy loved India. Her trip to India in 1958-59 wrought a great change in her. Dorothy Mercer had always been a Vedantist in name but India turned Dorothy into a real devotee.

Who was Dorothy Mercer? I shall try to describe, for those who did not know her, something of Dorothy's life and personality. And those who were her friends, in India and the West, will perhaps be pleased, by reading these words, to think of her once again.

I write about Dorothy also because in her story evidence may be found that our faith is well founded. I write about Dorothy because she stands for something important. The example she provided offers proof that what the scriptures tell us, what the teachers say, is true. Religion does work! Religion worked for Dorothy. The last years of her life were marked by a growing sweetness of character. The final stage, so tragic, was made bearable by Dorothy's faith. And her death can only be called wonderful, as the death of a real devotee must be.

Dorothy Mercer was one of the contributors to *What Vedanta Means to Me*. In her story Dorothy tells how she had been associated with Vedanta from her very birth at San Francisco in 1901. "I was born into the Vedanta" she said. Dorothy's family attended the Vedanta Society of Northern California. The Swami in charge from 1903 to 1914 was Swami Trigunatita, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Dorothy recalled that, although she was then just a little girl, she was deeply impressed by Swami Trigunatita. Now and then he would come to her home to visit her parents, her, and her brother. At least once, Dorothy remembered, Swami Trigunatita held her on his lap. Once every week Dorothy used to go with her mother to the Hindu Temple at 2963 Webster Street, San Francisco, to see the Swami. "To others," she recalled, Swami's office was cluttered up: to me it was finely ordered. There were stereopticon slides, a revolving globe of the world, Swami's resplendent watch fob, a roll-top desk piled high with papers, and no 'don't touch' admonitions." Finally, "There was a round, red stained glass window opening on the street which, on our last visit to his office, Swami told me was a motion picture." Later in her article Dorothy explained that the Swami had used this device to teach her that worldly things which one may think are real are only a passing show, having no lasting substantiality at

all.

Later, as a young woman, Dorothy became acquainted with a second direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Abhedananda. He lived and worked in the San Francisco region from 1918 to 1921. "Not only did I go to all of Abhedananda's lectures and classes, but during this period I read Swami Vivekananda assiduously. I too wanted to be a philosopher, a sannyasin no less." Here Dorothy quotes from Swamiji's "Song of the Sannyasin":

Strike off thy fetters! Bonds that bind thee down
Of shining gold....

"That I had no 'shining gold' to 'strike off' did not deter me from marching right along--in imagination."

By doing office work to earn funds to attend the university Dorothy gained a good education and eventually became a college teacher. She took one of her degrees at Oxford at the time when Dr. S. Radhakrishnan was there as Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics. For many years Dorothy was an instructor in English at the San Francisco City College. Among other subjects, she taught the Bhagavad-Gita as literature.

Dorothy died of cancer on Thursday, March 8, 1962, in San Francisco. Curiously, in 1962 Ramakrishna's birthday fell on that very same day, March 8. There was no funeral. Dorothy had willed her body to the University of California Medical School.

Although she lived most of the year in San Francisco, Dorothy used to travel south frequently. She had long vacations from her college at Christmastime and in the summer. Dorothy was a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and was a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda. She often spent her holidays as a guest at the Hollywood center. Over a period of years we grew to know Dorothy rather well.

Dorothy was nearly six feet tall. She wore spectacles. She was somewhat professorial in manner. Being slightly deaf, and furthermore being accustomed to addressing large classes of college students, she talked loudly and with intense positiveness. In the days before 1959 our dinner table was the scene for many strong pronouncements. Dorothy had an intense interest in Plato; probably one reason she admired Plato was that she felt the philosophy of Plato substantiated the philosophy of Vedanta in western terms. But Dorothy's interests were wide. She was an enthusiastic liberal and had strong convictions concerning the many situations in the world which were not, in her eyes, what they should be.

Being firmly convinced of the superiority of Vedanta, Dorothy could not see how anyone could but accept its teachings. Indeed, as Dorothy herself once jested, in her defense of the tolerant Vedanta her attitude bordered on intolerance!. In 1957 she started writing a book for western readers, whose purpose was to set forth the logicity of Vedanta philosophy. As part of this effort Dorothy conceived the idea of distributing a questionnaire, to be answered by members of the Vedanta societies in America, telling of

their satisfaction with the faith they had accepted. This questionnaire was sent to more than two hundred Vedanta members, of whom nearly half responded. Dorothy felt that these first-hand testimonies of the respondents would be useful in providing evidence supporting the special excellence of Vedanta theory and practice.

We in the Hollywood center could see, of course, that beneath her academic exterior, her nondualistic leanings, Dorothy had a good sense of humor and was basically a lovable and loving person. She certainly was most generous. Still and all, she was very argumentative, very severe in her judgements of those having views differing from her own. In those pre-1959 days we at the Vedanta Society of Southern California mostly thought of Dorothy as a well-meaning but very dry intellectual.

Then in 1958-1959, on a sabbatical from her college, Dorothy went to India. She stayed from November through March, and as a ward of the Ramakrishna Mission toured India with characteristic energy. In the letters she wrote to Hollywood, in a detailed account of her pilgrimage composed in India and mailed to us from abroad, and most of all in the changed attitude she manifested upon her return, we saw the emergence of a different person.

It can easily be imagined that many things in India were upsetting to Dorothy. She was an idealist, to whom every human's economic well-being, opportunity for social progress, and physical welfare meant much. The poor conditions which she saw on her trip distressed her a great deal.

Yet the goodness she encountered, the sweetness of the people, the charm of the children, the devotional qualities expressed by common men and women--these more than made up for all the sights of human misery. And particularly touching was the affection expressed toward her by many swamis of the Ramakrishna Order.

Dorothy wrote just before leaving India, in a letter dated March 23, 1959, and postmarked Belur Math: "This is the last letter from this beloved address." In that letter she went on to describe how a number of young men, who had just been initiated into sannyas and brahmacharya, on Ramakrishna's birthday, had come to the quarters she shared with two or three other western visitors, to perform their first act of ceremonial begging. "The day after Sri Ramakrishna's birthday," she wrote, "the new swamis and brahmacharis came to us to beg. To feed forty-nine young men radiant with love is quite an experience. On Sri Ramakrishna's birthday they [the sannyasins to be] attended their own funeral; the next day they were reborn in God. They were living in such a beautiful, bright haze that we were almost overcome. One of our members had to leave the room she was so close to tears. I wasn't close to tears; I seemed to partake of their happiness."

The account of her experiences, which Dorothy sent to us before her return, was equally indicative. In her descriptions of the holy places she had gone to in India, the rituals she had witnessed, the devotional qualities she had observed, we saw that Dorothy had truly understood and appreciated the spirit of the country. Perhaps the most revealing statement in the article was that she mentioned, with obvious pleasure, that she was being addressed by Indians as "Mother Dorothy". Mother Dorothy! We could

imagine nothing less characteristic of the person we knew than that she should appear motherly--and moreover that she should take pleasure in so appearing and in being so addressed. Obviously something had happened to Dorothy.

After her return from India, Dorothy continued to spend her vacations with us. But now the subject matter of our table conversations was very different. Dorothy talked of nothing but the people and places she had known in India, connected with Sri Ramakrishna and his Math and Mission. She often described the love expressed by several of the senior swamis: Gurudas Maharaj (Swami Atulananda, described at the end of this chapter) whom she had known when she was a little girl in San Francisco; Swamis Madhavananda and Dayananda, who had worked for a time in the mid-twenties in the Vedanta Society of Northern California and were already known to her; Swami Shankarananda, the President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission; "lovable" Bharat Maharaj (Swami Abhayananda); and "dear" Sujji Maharaj (Swami Nirvanananda). The inspiring, and the bizarre, experiences she had had now animated the table talk. The old argumentative, didactic personality had vanished. How comfortable it was now to be with Dorothy! It was obvious that, as one of our number remarked, "India made Dorothy a devotee."

But there was not much time remaining for Dorothy to enjoy India in retrospect. She had been vouchsafed her experience; it had done for her what was to have been done; and she was soon to vanish from this world. In the summer of 1961 Dorothy came to stay with us in Hollywood as usual. But by August she was experiencing severe physical difficulties and thought it best to hasten back to her doctor in San Francisco. It was discovered that Dorothy had cancer of a type which spread with great rapidity. She was almost continually in the hospital from the autumn until she died in the following spring.

During the fall and winter we did not hear from Dorothy directly. We do not know what her thoughts consisted of during this time. Probably she kept her silence because, with typical independence--and perhaps with a new evenness of mind--she did not want to make herself a problem to others. But we kept informed as to her condition through some of her relatives who lived in San Francisco. In late February these relatives let us know that Dorothy probably had very little time to live. I was sent to San Francisco, as a representative of Swami Prabhavananda and Dorothy's many friends at the Center, to express the love of those in Hollywood and to see whether there was anything she needed or wanted. I took with me a vial of precious Ganges water. It is customary in India for those who are about to die to take Ganges water, thus feeling blessed and purified. Dorothy knew about this custom.

The person I saw, when I walked into Dorothy's hospital room, was almost unrecognizable. It was heartbreaking to see how old and emaciated Dorothy had become. As best I could I gave her the messages from Hollywood. On her part, in halting voice, interrupted by spells of weakness, Dorothy spoke again of the familiar, sweet experiences of her happy time in India.

I went back to see Dorothy the following day. "Dorothy," I asked, "is there anything you need, anything that anyone can do for you? Swami Prabhavananda will come to see you if you want him to. And, Dorothy, maybe you would like to have this." I placed the small bottle on the bedside table. "It is Ganges water".

For a moment Dorothy was almost like her old severe self again. "I am not going to die. I am going to recover. It is very dear of Swami to offer to come to see me. But it will not be necessary at all." But I think it was then that Dorothy made her final surrender. Within a week she had sent word that, yes, she would appreciate seeing her guru.

Swami Prabhavananda went to San Francisco to see Dorothy on March 2. Dorothy accepted with great devotion the Ganges water that the Swami gave her. She said she knew what it meant. She told Swami: "I know I am going to die; and it is all right." She said that she was maintaining, every moment, the recollectedness of Sri Ramakrishna. She said: "I know that Swami Trigunatita is going to come for me." And this is how, six days later, it was.

4.

Her name was Mlle. Henriette Girre, and she lived in Marseille. Her Indian name was Nalini, the name of one of the seven branches of the Ganges. Like the river she was named after, Nalini brought good to all, without asking anything for herself. Nalini exemplified a perfect case of a bhakta regarding herself as the Lord's instrument. I respect her for her modesty, her serviceability, and her self-effacement.

I never knew her exact age nor much of her early life. She was quite a bit older than I and was a disciple of Swami Siddheswarananda. She was by profession a stenographer. At some point she had acquired a good knowledge of English. When I came to know her she was working for a coal merchant. She should have been retired, but her employer was an old man and she felt he needed her. Her job was doing the accounting and typing up monthly bills.

Nalini was not very rich. She lived alone in an old-fashioned unheated flat. But her dull job and her uncomfortable personal existence didn't seem to bother her. She was like a sadhu in her habits. Her passion was translating Ramakrishna texts from English into French. This is how she spent her evenings and her week ends, and doing this was what made her happy. "I do it for Mother," she used to say. "It's the only service of which I am capable."

Unbidden, Nalini translated book after book. The Bhagavad Gita, For Seekers of God, the unabridged Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna which makes up more than a thousand manuscript pages, and many other texts. These were given freely to us at Gretz to be used as we wished. I have used the word "instrument" in a metaphorical sense--but she was an instrument also in a literal sense--indeed almost a machine. She translated directly from the original, concentrating on the English original with her eyes while her fingers all the time turned out a graceful French equivalent on the typewriter.

In the early years at Gretz I wrote out my Sunday lectures in English and sent them to Nalini in order that she could make the French version which I should later pronounce on Sunday. She loved to do this and would have the French text back by return mail in just a day or two. I felt guilty letting the congregation think that the expressive French language was my own, but she never wanted to be credited as translator. "No, no, that's our secret," she would say.

As Nalini grew older I worried about her living alone and insisted that she install a telephone so that she could summon aid in case of need. For some time she resisted this idea because she wouldn't want to bother anyone should such a necessity arise. "Mother will take care of me," was the excuse she gave. The phone finally installed was used chiefly by me calling from Gretz to see how she was.

And the Divine Mother did look after Nalini and granted her wish that she should never be a bother to anybody. On that last day the neighbor from upstairs came and knocked on the door, just to say good morning. Nalini had not been feeling well and had stayed in bed. But the knock aroused her; she got up to go to the door to see who was there. As the neighbor entered, as silently and as modestly as she had lived, Nalini expired.

Nalini was a model to me of ready service coupled with perfect self-effacement. She would have been willing to disappear without a trace. Thus I am glad that I can memorialize her in this little sketch, as an example of devotion's power to perfect.

5.

In its complete version, the New York edition of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is a large volume running to some eleven hundred pages. It was translated by Swami Nikhilananda from M.'s original five volumes in Bengali. This book is on its way to being considered one of the most important religious works of the world. Editions in numerous foreign languages have been issued or are in preparation.

Most devotees have read the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna from beginning to end, probably several times. Or they keep the volume on the bedside table and study a page or two nearly every night before going to sleep, as was, for example, Swami Madhavananda's habit. Most devotees are familiar with the incidents related, with what Ramakrishna counseled, with--in a general way--the numerous contemporaries who people the Gospel, with the Master's proverbs and parables. But try to track down a particular reference! Among the hundreds of thousands of words in this great book, finding what you want when you want it is nearly impossible. True, there is a short index, a glossary of Vedantic terms, and an index to first lines of songs, but these are of little help in specific cases.

Well, recently something has occurred to change all that. Early in 1985 there appeared the Concordance to the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, New York Edition. This must be one of the best and most complete scriptural indexes ever devised. Its publication is a major event in the Ramakrishna chronicle. The Concordance is a tool capable of making the serious study of Ramakrishna's life and teaching very much easier and infinitely more profound. Untold thousands of future Ramakrishna enthusiasts will reverently thank its compiler.

The story of the development of this Concordance is an inspiring example of devotion at work. No Vedanta center in India or the West could have undertaken such a vast editorial effort. We remember that the first concordance to the Bible, brought out in 1247, was reputedly compiled by Hugo de St. Caro

with the aid of five hundred monks. And yet here is this Concordance, issued barely fifty years after the English publication of the complete Gospel, wonderfully well executed, all the work directed and the development costs borne by a devotee.

The Concordance is nearly 650 pages long, its format that of the size of typing paper. There are, arranged in double columns, seventy to eighty subject entries per page, making something like forty or fifty thousand references and cross references. Every word Sri Ramakrishna uttered, every teaching he gave, every example he used, every song he sang or listened to, every person he addressed his remarks to may quickly be found by page number and position on the page of the New York Gospel.

There follows an appendix on Ramakrishna's religious experiences and ecstatic states, with indications as to where references to them are to be found.

Next comes a fifty-page appendix identifying, with biographical information and an explanation of their significance in the Ramakrishna story, relatives, disciples, acquaintances, and other contemporaries of the Master. I counted more than four hundred, and the pages in the Gospel where they are mentioned are all indicated. Having this biographical dictionary at hand will enormously aid those admirers of Ramakrishna who, like me, can never seem to keep in mind exactly who is who among the many persons he encountered.

There is then an appendix containing the names of all the deities, incarnations, and historical personages referred to in the Gospel, with page numbers on which they are mentioned. Finally there is an appendix listing Thakur's prayers, and finally an index to the songs and authors of songs which appear in the Gospel. The name of the devotee who carried through this project is Miss Katharine Whitmarsh, or Prasanna.

The name Whitmarsh will be found in works pertaining to Swami Vivekananda, for her family was associated with and indeed connected by marriage to Swami Vivekananda's American friends, the Leggetts. Miss MacLeod was Prasanna's aunt. Prasanna was present, aged two years, at Ridgely Manor during the "great summer" of 1899 when Swami Vivekananda was there. Prasanna recalls Vivekananda vaguely, remembers that he gave her a penny.

Prasanna's interest in Sri Ramakrishna increased with the passage of the years. She came to live in Santa Barbara near the convent of the Vedanta Society and began in earnest, at first for her own use, to index the Gospel. As she says in the Preface of the Concordance, "It was natural, therefore, when I began my study to the Gospel, that I should begin making notes of phrases and key words whose location I wanted to remember, keeping them in a special notebook. As this private index grew, it became more comprehensive and elaborate and finally had to be transferred first to 5" x 7" cards and then to 3" x 5" cards (some 40,000 of them). Thus one might say the Concordance was born in the form of notebooks, from which it went through several transitions: to cards, to typewritten 11" x 17" sheets, and finally into a computer, the total process occurring over a period of some fifteen years." Further on in the Preface Prasanna gives thankful credit to the large staff of helpers (some paid workers and some devotee aides

who contributed their time) who helped her. All expenses were born by her.

The work is done now and will remain for years as a monument to the inspiration brought into the life of one devoted person by Sri Ramakrishna. Prasanna completes her Preface with these words: "The benefits of dealing with Sri Ramakrishna's words and teachings on a consistent basis are impossible to evaluate or describe, but the presence of his thought in our lives can only be an asset of the most valuable kind. All of us who have had an opportunity to participate in this work have been blessed by it, and I am grateful to be able to offer this Concordance to all users of the English translation of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, whoever and wherever they may be."

6.

The first time I met Chester F. Carlson was in December, 1963, at Belur Math in India. Swami Nikhilananda visited India for the Centenary Celebrations of Swami Vivekananda, accompanied by several devotees of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York. Among them was Mrs. Max Beckman, widow of the celebrated German painter, and Mr. Carlson.

All I knew about Mr. Carlson at the time was that he was the President of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center. It was not until later that I read the "Reader's Digest" account of his success as inventor of xerography and consequent wealth. Hence, not having been rendered respectful by his name and the millions behind him, I was able to treat Chet as the very nice, simple person that he was. He was friendly to me, very much interested in the fact that I was at that time participating in the week-long ceremonies that mark one's entrance into sannyas. He took my picture several times.

Speaking of photography, I had a good Zeiss camera and a considerable amount of advanced photo equipment with me, as I intended to do a lot of photographing in India. Chet had a tiny, toy-like camera which hardly needed any focusing. I rather deprecated his photographic activities, but thought that after all such a simple camera was probably appropriate for such a simple man! Later I understood that this camera was one of the first Instamatics, which had been given to Chet by one of the officials of the Kodak company of Rochester, so that he, as an accomplished engineer and world-famous inventor, might test out its performance. The Instamatic, as we know, proved to be a revolutionary advance in the field of popular photography.

It was only four years later that Chet died, on September 19, 1968. "The New York Times" printed a long obituary, together with a photo of Chet with a model of his first dry copying machine, which was to make the name Xerox a word known internationally and its inventor one of the richest men in America.

In the summer of 1965 Chet and his wife Dorris visited us in Santa Barbara, where I was then living. Chet came to look at Robert Maynard Hutchins' Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, as he was considering giving the Hutchins center a grant. We were pleased to meet Dorris, who had for some years sponsored a project through which the bookshop of the Vedanta Society of Southern California distributed religious books to prison libraries.

I visited the Carlsons at their home in Pittsfield, New York, in March, 1966, on the way to take up my new post at Gretz. Both were kind and generous. Chet spoke a little about the problem of having a lot of money and trying to use it wisely. There were so many demands. Any proffer of interest or friendship might conceal motives of calculation. Ordinary human intercourse became strained. One wanted to be generous, but generous in a manner which would help, not corrupt, the recipient. Chet referred to his present role as that of a "prudent distributor". Being that constituted a nearly full-time job and a good deal of anxiety, plus discrimination of the subtlest sort. It was a new idea to me that just as having very little money brings problems, so does the possession of great wealth.

It was then that Chet mentioned that if I had some research project in mind I could call on him for--he never used the word money--"support". I did have such a project, the tracing of Swami Vivekananda's activities in Europe in 1896-1900, which had never up to that time been undertaken. I carried out this investigation during the next years, the work resulting in seven or eight articles on Vivekananda in Europe, published in English in the "Prabuddha Bharata", and later as a book in Bengali--a work which subsequent biographers of the Swami have found useful as a reference. Chet, through the Shanti Foundation, met the expense of this research to the extent of \$1,500. Lovers of Vivekananda should know this.

Later, Chet visited the Centre Vedantique Ramakrichna during a Sunday in 1967. He was on his way to Germany to take delivery of a new Mercedes, which he said he considered easier to drive than his current Lincoln. His time with us was very short and the only sightseeing I could offer was to take him to see a newly completed modern Catholic church and community center in the nearby town of Grisy. Chet was interested and sweetly appreciative. He pleased us by showing that he accepted our attention as normal friendship toward a devotee, not as a potential benefactor, by leaving a donation of a mere 200 Francs (about \$40.00).

In remembering Chet, I recall especially those days at Belur Math in 1963-64. Swami Nikhilananda's attitude toward Chet was completely that of guru toward a disciple. The Swami didn't hesitate to exact services from Chet: "Mr. Carlson, see to it that a light bulb is found to replace this one which has burned out; Mr. Carlson, you will arrange the taxi for today's trip to Dakshineswar; Mr. Carlson, when you go to Calcutta today, you will kindly do the following for me...." In a good-humored, slightly amused way Chet did everything obediently. I cannot think of anyone I've ever known so devoid of self-importance.

7.

At noon on the last day of January, 1955, at the Vivekananda Home of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, a small, lame, grey-haired woman died at the age of seventy-nine. Her name was Ida Merrill Winkley Ansell. Anyone would have said that there was nothing unusual about this event or about the life which had preceded it. And to a certain extent this is true. From any social or vocational standpoint Ida Ansell's life was rather routine. She was born in New York City, spent her childhood in Boston, and moved to the Pacific West Coast before reaching her teens. There she finished the eighth grade, studied shorthand and typing, and worked as a stenographer for many years, first in San Francisco and later in

Los Angeles. After she retired, from 1948 on, she stayed at the Hollywood Vedanta center, where she lived as one of the monastic family and assisted with office work.

From a religious standpoint, however, as I have shown in section 2 of Chapter Six, Ida Ansell's life was extraordinary. For she was, from the time of Swami Vivekananda's second visit to the West, and until she died fifty-five years later, associated with many details of the work of the Ramakrishna Order in America. Five direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna came to the West; she met four of them: Swami Vivekananda, whose lectures and classes she attended in 1900; Swami Turiyananda, who initiated her as his disciple and gave her the name of Ujjvala--"the shining one"; Swami Abhedananda; and Swami Trigunatitananda. Of the second-generation swamis who came to the West, she knew and kept in touch with nearly every one. "Ujje", as her friends called her, was a participant in, and a major witness of, the opening stages of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement in America.

And Ujjvala was among its first historians. This happened mostly by accident. True, she was interested in writing; she studied books on composition and always dreamed, as so many people do, of one day producing a literary masterwork. Historical subjects would not have interested her; her ambition was to be a glamorous lady novelist! But the years went by and the dream remained a dream. Then in her seventies Ujjvala realized that she possessed much valuable material in the accumulation of notes she had taken at the time she had known Swamiji and Swami Turiyananda. She came to understand that it was her obligation to give this material to the public. In doing so her lifetime desire to be an author was fulfilled. Her memories of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Turiyananda, published in "Vedanta and the West", were received eagerly. They were read appreciatively in America and Europe; in India they created a sensation and were translated into several Indian languages. These reminiscences have great value for the picture they give of the pioneering days of Vedanta in America. They are written in a candid, lively, childlike style, reflecting Ujjvala's personality.

Finally, Ujjvala began the most exacting literary job of all--the transcription of the shorthand notes she had taken in the spring of 1900 of thirteen lectures by Swami Vivekananda. (Four other lectures from her notes had been published previously in the Northern California center's "The Voice of India".) Her notes were "cold" as well as not always complete. She debated with herself as to whether the lectures should be given out at all, out of fear of doing violence to Swamiji's wonderful style and fluency. At last she came to this decision: "Now we see that Swamiji was a special messenger of God and that every word he said was full of significance. So even though my notes were somewhat fragmentary, I have yielded to the opinion that their contents are precious and must be given for publication." Completing the heavy labor of making these transcriptions only two months before she died, Ujjvala gave the publication rights to them to any organ of the Ramakrishna Order which might wish to use them. These lectures now form a part of Swamiji's Complete Works.

Ujjvala explained that the lectures were given in San Francisco, Oakland, and Alameda, in churches, in the Alameda and San Francisco Homes of Truth (New-Thought associations of that day), and in rented halls. Some were free to the public, and others were given in courses of three for a dollar. Altogether, she calculated Swamiji gave, besides daily interviews and informal classes, at least thirty to forty major addresses in March, April, and May. He was phenomenally prolific. "How he could speak so often and

yet always with such originality is something no one has ever been able to explain," she remarked. "He himself confessed that time after time on his lecture tours he felt exhausted intellectually and incapable of appearing the next day. Then, as his authorized life explains, he would be aided by an inner, sometimes outer, voice suggesting subjects and ideas."

Swamiji's lectures, Ujjvala recalled, attracted all levels of people, drawn by various incentives such as curiosity, interest, a desire for information, and a real yearning for truth. There was something in every one of Swamiji's discourses for each; and perhaps some of the apparent contradictions in them, she conjectured, were due to his attempt to help people at various stages of development.

As Ujjvala explained, "I was just an amateur stenographer at the time I took the notes of Swamiji's lectures. The only experience I had had was in connection with the talks of Miss Lydia Bell, the leader of one of the Homes of Truth of San Francisco. Miss Bell spoke slowly and deliberately, and I could almost always get down every word. But," Ujjvala explained, "one would have needed a speed of at least three hundred words per minute to capture all of Swamiji's torrents of eloquence. I possessed less than half the required speed, and at the time I had no idea that the material would have value to anyone but myself. In addition to his fast speaking pace, Swamiji was a superb actor. His stories and imitations absolutely forced one to stop writing, to enjoy watching him."

Thus Ujjvala must always have a definite place in the story of the development of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement in the West. But to those who knew her and lived with her, as I did, she was not a bit like a historical figure. She was an interesting person and a responsive friend. She was ingenuous, having the true, if sometimes tantalizing innocence of a child; it is significant that Swami Turiyananda often called her Baby. Ujjvala had a strong zest for life and had more vitality than many people half her age. It was an experience to hear her talk of the old days; a visit to her room was like a trip to a museum or an old curiosity shop crammed full of books, photographs, bric-a-brac, and other mementos accumulated during a long life. Sitting in her rocker in the midst of the congestion, Ujjvala would tell perhaps of how Swami Vivekananda had once made rock candy for her when she and other devotees spent some memorable weeks with him in 1900 at a summer retreat in Marin County. Or she would recall advice given by Swami Turiyananda more than fifty years before at Shanti Ashrama in central California where the Swami had begun to train a small band of students in work and meditation. She would take out from one of the innumerable boxes which overflowed the space on shelves, in drawers, and even under the bed, perhaps the stub of a ticket to one of Swamiji's San Francisco lectures, or a letter from Swami Turiyananda, or some rare photograph. When the daily worship was instituted at the Ramakrishna Monastery at Trabuco, Ujjvala gave as a holy relic for the Trabuco shrine her most precious possession, a portion of a yellow silk turban Swamiji had once owned and worn.

At Shanti Ashrama Ujjvala had made the acquaintance of Cornelius Heyblom, later Swami Atulananda, Gurudas Maharaj. The two became good friends and remained so until Ujjvala's death. During most of their fifty years of acquaintance Gurudas Maharaj lived in India, but the relationship was maintained through a twice-monthly exchange of letters. What Ujjvala wrote to Gurudas Maharaj is not known, but his letters to her, found after her death, comprised a great trove, carefully preserved by date. Ujjvala was by nature curious, and since she loved India, especially curious about that country. Probably her letters

to Gurudas Maharaj contained questions about his life in India, together with reports concerning the people he had formerly known at the Center and comments on the political and religious events of the day. Gurudas Maharaj replied with fascinating descriptions of the daily life he pursued as a western sadhu established in India. He replied also to her small talk, often humorously, by urging her to carry on her daily tasks with intelligence, and take a Vedantic view of people and events. The correspondence of Gurudas Maharaj to Ujjvala has been published in the recent book *With the Swamis in American and India*.

When I first met Gurudas Maharaj in India in 1953 he immediately asked for the latest news of Ujjvala. He wondered what he might send her. It was decided that this should be a cane, which I purchased in the Kankhal bazaar and carried on the trip back to Los Angeles. Ujjvala was delighted and used Gurudas Maharaj's gift continually from then on. She was not parted from it even in death; I slipped the beloved Indian cane, given by her oldest friend and brought directly from what was to her the Holy Land, into her casket; it and her old body were cremated together.

Some of the most entertaining of the reminiscences Ujjvala used to recount concerned her experiences during the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. I have Ujjvala's notes describing this momentous event and its effect on her life; they are so lively and give such a vivid portrait of her that I cannot resist the temptation to include them in this account. Should I not do so they might easily be lost forever.

On the 18th of April in 1906, "Mother Nature, herself, awakened us", as Swami Trigunatita said in his lecture the following Sunday. It was a rough awakening and produced an upheaval in half a million lives. Many thousands were made suddenly homeless and lost all their possessions except what they could carry with them. With some the shock somewhat marred their judgment as to what was essential. I saw a bewildered gentleman pushing a carpetsweeper in front of him. There were no streetcars running. In many places the tracks were wrenched loose and had become broken and twisted masses of steel. The water mains were broken and control of the many fires that started south of Market Street was impossible. Martial law was immediately declared and warnings posted that pilferers would be shot. A five-story hotel in the Mission District sank in the ground to the level of the fourth story, so that the occupants who were not hurt just walked upstairs and out onto the sidewalk. It was a great leveler of rank, and for a time there was real democracy. I saw a little Japanese boy with his head on the lap of a fur-coated lady who was sitting on the steps of a Nob Hill mansion to rest her aching feet.

After the first shock the adaptability and resourcefulness of the people were amazing; tent colonies were soon established in the city parks for those whose homes were destroyed; big auditoriums were used to house the sick and injured; doctors and nurses volunteered their services; the government distributed blankets and food; barrels of hot coffee were made in the Presidio and anyone passing by who felt a need of a little stimulant could dip in the tin cup lying there and drink all he wanted. A few took refuge in neighboring towns,

but the great majority remained, and were actually able to enjoy the experience. Those whose homes remained standing shared their sleeping facilities with others, but could have neither fire nor light. Many erected little makeshift stoves on the curb in front of the home. Some put fences around the stoves to keep off the wind, and on one such fence we read a sign in big letters: "Palace Hotel." Many quickly accepted the situation gamely, made light of the hardships, and the ruined city gained the atmosphere of an immense picnic and a very genial hilarity prevailed. Even while the city was still burning, clearing of the ruined portions began. Arnold Genthe, the famous photographer, who lost all his possessions including his life's work and a valuable art collection, wandered all over the city even while preparations were being made to destroy his home [to help the firebreak] taking memorable photos of endless variety.

Food supplies and money were soon received from all parts of the nation and later from all over the world. Food distribution depots were established in many places, and rich and poor alike stood in line to get their allotment. Swami Trigunatita permitted me to go to the ashrama for a rest. Grandma Reynolds and I took a position until the reestablishment funds were available and then rented space in the hallway of an apartment building on the corner of Franklin Avenue and O'Farrell Street, one block from Van Ness Avenue, which now became the main street of the city. We knew that there would be plenty of business for public stenographers; and the amount allotted was sufficient to obtain two typewriters and a multigraph. All the big department stores and restaurants put up one-story wooden buildings. It was like a country town having a grand celebration of some special event. Flags were waving on all the buildings.

Although the atmosphere was one of gaiety, there was plenty of work to do. Many times we worked all night, going first to the Poodle Dog or some other French restaurant for dinner. Then we worked merrily for the first half of the night, drowsily but steadily for the second. We employed a young stenographer to help, and Grandma's ten-year old son Franklin became our officeboy and delivered the daily menus which we multigraphed for the Toke Point Oyster House and the Golden Pheasant. We took many of our meals at these places, and Franklin, wishing enlightenment regarding the various unknown food items listed, would also have a morning snack when he delivered the menus, selecting some unfamiliar item such as paté de foie gras. He was often disappointed.

Soon the work became so heavy that we decided to expand a little. We added a small room that had been used as a servant's room and used it for a dictation room. There I took dictation from various celebrities, from a prizefighter for whom I wrote a contract, to Father Sasia, Dean of the Jesuit Order of the Catholic Church, who used to come before breakfast to dictate letters. Working for him was an ideal beginning of the day's work. Then, finding that so much time was lost in coming to the office and going home, we rented the large former kitchen behind our office, which became parlor, kitchen, and bedroom. A piano was added against the huge French range which we did not use. That was our sitting room. In one corner we had a breakfast nook, with a gas plate and a small

cupboard. The remaining corner formed a bedroom for Grandma and Franklin. I slept on the back porch which was screened in for the purpose. We remained there until space was available for the office in a downtown building.

Back in the early 1950's I was given to appraising everyone. I had not yet fully understood the import of that intriguing verse in the Bhagavad-Gita affirming the fact that everyone follows his own nature, "even the sage". I was trying to judge Vedanta to see whether it worked, and Vedantists to see if the religion they professed changed and improved them. It was natural that I should attempt to evaluate an old-time Vedantist like Ujjvala. To my unpracticed eye of that period Ujjvala seemed vaguely worldly. She had a lively interest in the news scandals of the day, she loved to go to movies, and there was something hedonistic (or so it seemed to me) about her considerable fondness for sweets. Occasionally she would get mad at us and take refuge in a restaurant at the base of Ivar Hill, walking there rapidly and determinedly with the aid of her cane. Arrived at this destination, she would console herself by ordering pancakes drenched in syrup. As soon as I sensed what had happened I would get out the Center's car and bring her back. On these occasions she would be remorseful like a scolded puppy. By then Alfred Kinsey's monumental book on the human male had become a bestseller. Ujjvala went through the volume concealed inside an issue of the Prabuddha Bharata. Much of this apparent waywardness stemmed no doubt from the fact that Ujjvala had been a cripple since childhood and had been forced to live vicariously, experiencing very little of life except as an onlooker.

In any case, any doubt I might have had about Ujjvala's inner condition was resolved when she died. I was present during her final hours, and I know that Ujjvala was in contact with something or someone divine in her last moments. I know that whatever she may have seemed outwardly, Ujjvala inwardly was the loving child of Swamiji and his master and brethren.

The story is this. The brahmacharini who came to her room, as was usual, about seven o'clock on that Monday morning, found Ujjvala in bed, unconscious. She had been her usual lively self the evening before, having especially enjoyed some chocolate fudge I had made. We had, all of us, been sitting in Swami Prabhavananda's room. Suddenly Prabhavananda had asked Ujjvala: "Ujjvala, have you become butter?" He later said that the question had come to him unexpectedly and that he had given expression to it without quite knowing why. This was a reference to something Swami Turiyananda had told her around 1900 at Shanti Ashrama, that if she worked hard at spiritual life she could become butter. (The allusion of course being that one's sadhana is a process of separating what is useful and precious in one's true nature from what is worthless.) To everyone's surprise, as Ujjvala by nature tended to be self-deprecating, she had firmly replied: "Yes!"

The doctor stated that Ujjvala had had a massive stroke in her sleep. I went to her room. She was very attached to me, so I knew that I could rouse her if anyone could. In effect a certain consciousness did return, only to reject my salutations, as if to say, "Now let me be; I have serious things to do" and plunge inside again. It went on like this until about noon. Then she whispered "Mother", and tears flowed from the outside of her eyes. Swami Turiyananda had once told her: "What you want, you will get. If you want entertainment, you will get entertainment. If you want Mother you will get Mother." In an instant--from the dramatic change which came over her face--yes, it changed from flesh to clay--I saw that

Ujjvala had died. Swami Prabhavananda had waited gravely in his room. When I brought him the news, he said, "Her guru came for her."

8.

Earlier chapters of this book have amply--crankily, perhaps--shown that to me orderliness is next to--if not superior to--godliness. Writing is a means of ordering thought; after writing follows architecture, which is a means of ordering matter, or thought incarnated as matter. Indeed, according to classical schemes, architecture among all the arts is the one which most boldly tries to reproduce in its rhythm the order of the universe.

My life was enriched by my acquaintance with one who practiced this art--a superb architect. She was not what you would call a spiritual seeker in the usual sense. But her pursuit of perfection, beauty, harmony--all attributes of the spiritual--would put the ardor of ordinary devotees to shame. The nearest thing I ever heard her say about religion was, when someone asked her what her clients the Vedantists believed, was, approvingly: "Why, they believe in everything." Asked in an interview what a home should represent, she replied: "Shelter from the elements, a place of retreat and rest, a place of happiness if possible, and enough beauty to provide a life for the spirit."

Her name was Miss Lulah Maria Riggs. Lulah was the architect of our beautiful temple at Santa Barbara. I was the Society's representative in this and another of her projects, the temple gatehouse, so I grew to know her well. She had constructed many other notable buildings in the Santa Barbara area. In her later years she was nationally honored in many ways, including being named Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. The Vedanta temple and several other of her productions became recognized as classic buildings and are regular stops on organized tours of Santa Barbara. The fact that the temple was designed by Lulah and is a recognized masterpiece helped snobbish Santa Barbara accept rapidly something as unaccustomed as an organization drawing its inspiration from India.

Lulah was born in 1896 in Toledo, Ohio, and came to Santa Barbara to work in about 1930. She was not physically beautiful; indeed she was short and inclined to stoutness. She cared little for clothes and often wore a shapeless dark dress with a large coat which enveloped the dress and herself, almost as though she was trying to make herself disappear. Because she had no time to take proper care of her hair, and anyway considered personal grooming useless coquetry, she wore a sort of bandeau to obscure her lack of coiffure. To see her slowly walking down the street (she had had polio as a girl and had trouble with her feet) you would have thought that you were observing a peasant woman perhaps from some country in Eastern Europe.

For Lulah's real interest was her profession. Herself as a person hardly mattered to her; her concentration was on her creative activity; it was almost as though she as a body which needed to eat and bathe and sleep was of no importance. There existed only a wonderful creative mind bent on bringing order and beauty into existence.

Lutah was the embodiment of respect and I learned respect from her. First of all she respected people. The first thing she did when meeting someone new was to clearly set down his or her name. This she would memorize systematically, and always use his name when speaking of or to that person. To her, making mistakes in the pronunciation or spelling of someone's name were major breaches of good conduct. She always addressed people by their names and never forgot them even after years of absence.

She was courteous to all but hesitated, I think, about accepting commissions from people she felt might be of an unsympathetic nature. And it is true that not all potential clients cared to have her work for them, as she was reputed to be too meticulous and slow. To her a client was the same as a patient is to a good doctor or a disciple to a conscientious guru. She considered it was her responsibility to see that her client got the building he wanted and deserved and needed, and she would stop at nothing till that end had been accomplished. This included at times presenting the case of her client before the municipal authorities to solve objections concerning zoning or other regulations. If she agreed to do a house for a client, she studied thoroughly the client's character and living habits and then slowly and thoughtfully created a building which would suit those habits--and at the same time add joy and tranquility to his life. I lived for a while in one of the houses Lutah had designed, and I can testify to the fact that the arrangement of rooms and facilities, the way the house fitted its surroundings, and the feel the house gave one made living there a joy.

It is understandable that Lutah's building projects were often behind schedule and more expensive than had been anticipated. She held the long-term view; her buildings were meant to endure and to give satisfaction for a long time. Her architectural drawings were finely drawn, very painstakingly rendered, and many details were drafted at actual size. But if during the construction she found something that needed modifying she usually recommended modifying it. Her ego did not prevent her from admitting that the original conception could be improved. Such changes cost the client money, but she herself sacrificed her time and the payment normally due her for the extra time spent, in the interest of producing a better building. And of course since she worked so selectively and deliberately Lutah remained poor all her life.

Thus Lutah respected, first of all, people who became her clients. Secondly, she respected the site where the new building was to be constructed. Santa Barbara is a beautiful city set on sloping land between the mountains and the Pacific. She never did violence to a site by bulldozing everything away so as to start with a flat and arid piece of terrain. She saved the existing trees and other natural features, fitting the construction in as though it had been there always. Our temple was built on the side of the mountain where nothing had existed before except big boulders and savage vegetation. All this was preserved and indeed enhanced. Thus Lutah respected nature.

And she respected worthy physical materials and their own characteristics and used them to the best effect: wood, stone, metal, fabrics. To make cement cure properly, so that it would dry slowly and never crack, it is supposed to be kept wet for twenty-eight days. How many builders observe this? But Lutah did. She respected cement and gave cement its due. Thus I had to wet down with a hose the foundations of our temple twice a day for four weeks before anything further was done on the site. To give beautiful acoustics and a reposeful atmosphere the temple was built almost entirely of wood. A special wood

preservative was applied to every piece of wood that went into the construction. Hence nothing would rot or warp in the future. The interior was supported by wooden columns, some twenty-eight in all. They had to be, not posts found in the lumberyard, but the trunks of trees which had had their bark stripped off. "Big and round and solid like this," she explained, throwing her arms out in a wide embracing gesture. These pillars and the walls were finished naturally with nothing but wax, applied with a hand-rubbing using fine steel wool. During the finishing one of the pillars came out paler in color than the others. The decorator added a touch of paint in finishing that pillar to make it uniform with the others. Lulah spotted this artificiality immediately and was not amused. It did violence to naturalness; it was not an authentic action

The result for us was a building which, upon seeing it and going into it, creates joy. "You don't have to make an effort to meditate in the Vedanta temple of Santa Barbara; there meditation comes upon you," is an often overheard commentary.

This was Lulah Riggs. Working with her was one of the great experiences of my life. She showed me what a true artist is, and how a real artist--bent on inserting some harmony and beauty and order into this chaotic world--is an inspiring example of the real votary. She served selflessly--perfect work for the sake of perfect work--the divinity of her choice. Such was her demonstration of reverence and respect. Some of those who knew Lulah spoke contemptuously of her as a perfectionist. Yes, she was not the architect for those who demanded a building speedily built in the style of the moment and executed as inexpensively as possible. But I think she would have accepted that appellation of "perfectionist" with satisfaction. That's exactly what she was. In her own particular fashion she was a real yogi.

Knowing Lulah had a great effect on me. Whenever I find myself doing something too rapidly, or imperfectly, or without deliberation--cutting corners to achieve a more-or-less acceptable result--I think of her and mend my ways. For in so working I am not showing respect for the material or the task or my fellow man for whom the action is performed.

When we constructed the new chapel built at Gretz in 1986-87 I tried to remember everything Lulah had taught me and work accordingly. She and I had discussed the Gretz project in a general way the last time we had met, in 1981. She strongly concurred in our feeling that the addition should be presented as a wing of the "chateau", designed in the same 1880 style. The consensus is that the result is thoroughly satisfactory--an addition which meets our needs, gives a feeling of repose, and adds to the dignity of the "chateau".

Lulah died on March 8, 1984. But she lives on as model and example in her work in Santa Barbara in the way I have indicated, in our new chapel at Gretz, and in my heart.

We have all heard stories about early Christians who were martyred because of their faith. I want now to recount a modern story about someone who lived a martyred life for many years in order to uphold a

spiritual principle. This is an actual story concerning actual people whom I knew; but because the circumstances were so unusual and subject to misinterpretation I may be considered indiscreet should I reveal the names and places. I shall therefore use initials. The main character in the story, Swami A, may be seen as an example of someone who followed the behavior of a holy man literally, against great odds. Swami A., it should be noted, was a disciple of Maharaj, Swami Brahmananda.

There was in a large American city a Ramakrishna center headed by an Indian Swami whom I shall call Swami A. When he first arrived from India years ago he had had very little support and also suffered from poor health. His situation was really difficult. Then an American woman, Mme. W., took an interest in this Swami and helped him gradually establish the center and recover his health. Swami A's work began to assume a certain success; a good house in a prominent location was acquired, and devotees began to come.

Mme. A assumed thus the role of manager of the center. In a sense she considered the Swami her product and more or less her protégé. Having been his original supporter, she resented the too close attentions of new devotees. It could almost be said that she wanted to keep the Swami as her personal property and the Center her private domain. She was a woman of strong nature and fought to keep her influence over the Swami. This is a situation which can occur anywhere--in political organizations, in business offices, in social situations, in churches, and, as I have said, even in Vedanta societies.

I shall recount my one encounter with Mrs. W. In 1952 when I set out for India I began the pilgrimage by visiting all the Vedanta societies in America and Europe. One of the American centers was that of which Swami A. was leader. It was situated in a city far from the main route of my itinerary, but to make my pilgrimage complete I made a big detour to go there. I had written the Swami in advance and received a welcome to visit him on a certain day at a certain hour.

I arrived at the Center at the moment agreed on and rang the doorbell; the door was opened by an unsmiling woman who demanded in an unfriendly tone what it was I wanted. I told her who I was and that I had an appointment with the Swami. "I shall see if he is here," she replied dryly, and closed the door in my face. I was surprised and anxious, since the visit had been arranged in advance, and it had cost me a considerable effort to reach that city.

After some time the door was opened and this woman, who now I understood to be Mme. W., said, grudgingly: "All right you can see the Swami, but don't stay long." Swami A., when I reached him, of course proved to be very gracious and in a sense apologized for the cold reception. This was my one and only encounter with Mme. W.

Gurudas Maharaj (Swami Atulananda) in his conversations, published as *Atman Alone Abides* recounts another incident concerning Mme. W. A new Swami, whom we shall call Saroj Maharaj, had arrived from India to work as assistant at this Center. He had been accepted by Mrs. W. unwillingly. Within a few days an event occurred which so offended Saroj Maharaj that he left the Center and returned to India, where for years afterwards he criticized the Vedanta work in America.

Of course the newcomer, Saroj Maharaj, was in a way at fault. Like many Indians, he had never been used to carrying his own baggage; carrying was the work of porters. He had not unlearned this traditional way of thinking. Early in his stay at the center to which I refer, he, Mrs. W., and Swami A. were to set out on an auto trip. The auto belonged to Mrs. W. and it was she who drove. The car was at the door and Mme. W. and Swami A. were seated in the car, ready to start. But where was Saroj Maharaj? Mrs. W. called up to his room. Saroj Maharaj thrust his head out the window and called out that he was ready too, but had no one to carry down his valise. Swami A, understanding the situation, went up and brought down the valise, so that the three travelers could depart. But Mrs. W was so incensed that the head of the Center and a senior swami was required to be the porter for the new assistant that she scolded Saroj Maharaj mercilessly, and from then on did all that she could to make his continued stay at the Center impossible.

But this is more than the story of a strong woman and a seemingly weak man. Swami A. understood the situation completely and took the position he did as a matter of principle. He could have divested himself of Mrs. W. but decided not to. Here is an explanation in the words of one of his disciples.

In either 1958 or 1959, when I was having an interview with Swami A., I asked him about Mrs. W. I don't remember my question exactly, but his answer was: "Swami Brahmananda sent her to me." When Swami Prabhavananda visited the Center in the mid 1960's, after Swami A. had died, somehow the talk one morning, with him alone, turned to Mrs. W., and I told him what Swami A. had said to me. Swami Prabhavananda's reply in regard to Swami A. was: "He was deluded." I didn't agree or disagree.

Since then in the last few years Mrs. P. in talking about Swami A., confided in me, regarding Mrs. W., that Swami A. had said to her: "I was told" [apparently by his guru]-- this in a firm voice.

It could be said that Swami A. had an overwhelming love for Swami Brahmananda, who had told him what the nature of a holy man should be. The scorpion story was one that Swami A. recounted many times. [The parable of Sri Ramakrishna, of the scorpion which falls into the river and is in danger of being drowned. A holy man rescues the poor scorpion and is stung by it. Again the scorpion falls into the water and again the holy man rescues it, only to be stung again. Sri Ramakrishna explained that it was the nature of the scorpion to sting and of the holy man to be compassionate; and why should the holy man cease being compassionate just because he happened to get stung?] Also the story of Swamiji, when he said to a devotee: "Go to hell a thousand times and I shall take you out", and the example of Holy Mother's life and teachings.

Swami S. [who in time became the new assistant] has said that Swami A. was generous to a fault. Because he was so grateful to Mrs. W. for evidently "saving his life", although I do not know just what that occasion was, I think Swami A. found it impossible to do anything about her. "I can mitigate," he said once in regard to her. But there it ended. The

scorpion story was always on his mind, plus whatever instruction Swami Brahmananda gave him, before his death and even after his death.

Let me relate an incident that may not be known. In August, 1955, another devotee and I stayed in M. [the Center's retreat house] for a week. Mrs. W. had said to me not to let G., an elderly devotee, come to the house.

Neither of us had a car and the garbage piled up. We had no way to dispose of it. Our problem was presented to Swami S., who asked G. to come and take away the garbage. Then on Saturday afternoon Mrs. W. drove up. We had just finished washing the kitchen floor. She went out on the screened porch and sat down and we sat at the other end. Then I had to explain about G.--and what a dressing down I got! Mrs. W. decided that I could not come down to M. for the second week I had planned on. She was macho and tough. Talk about a dictatorial empress! She was that!

So with grief and disappointment and hurt feelings and my tail between my legs like a forlorn puppy I went home. In September one morning Swami A. telephoned and asked whether I could meet him in the Hotel L. at 10:00 o'clock on a certain morning. So I did. I can still see Swami walking to the hotel, as I watched for his coming, his hat on his head, walking steadily, not hurrying. This was how I had an interview with him. It had to be a surreptitious one.

Anyhow, during the interview I brought up the hiss story of Sri Ramakrishna. [The story of the cobra which was told not to bite but was allowed to hiss in self-protection.] Swami A said that I was not even to hiss. The message was to bear everything.

Are we to suppose that Brahmananda was indifferent to Swami A. and his situation? He must have helped him to bear Mrs. W. and showered him with blessings. His successor, Swami S., said to me a few months ago that Swami A. was a great saint. Someone once told me, if I remember correctly, that Swami A. had said that he didn't expect to be understood. Dr. P., a psychiatrist, and one of Swami A's disciples, told me in 1955: "Swami has the patience of a Job."

He was also, one might say, the embodiment of tactfulness and gentleness. Once in one of his sermons he was giving his ideas concerning the spreading of religion in a foreign country. He quoted: "Be as gentle as doves and as wise as serpents." His approach to the Christian community was that. He always stressed seeing the good side, so his appreciation of Christ warmed the Christian ministers to him. One of his medical advisers, a doctor whom I knew, said to me about having an interview with Swami A: "It was like talking with God." This was the wonderful feeling Swami gave people.

Too bad I was not advanced enough, pure enough, to get the full benefit. I asked him once

"What will I have?"--meaning in regard to spiritual experience. With warm emphasis Swami said to me: "You will have everything." That's how good he was to people.

I wish to add a word from myself. I have been puzzled by this story, and as indicated above, my guru was contemptuous of Swami A's tolerance of Mrs. W. He often said that she drove potential devotees away and practically ruined the Center. But as the years have passed I think I have begun to understand and appreciate the greatness of Swami A.

Ramakrishna said that a householder may protect himself by hissing. But a monk may not even hiss. And he spoke many times of the virtue of forbearance: "He who forbears lives," were his words. In addition, we remember Jesus's words, quoted in Matthew 18:22: "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

Swami A. gave us a lesson in forbearance. Have we not all seen situations in which a person was burdened with a difficult relationship--an associate with a terrible character, a perpetually unfaithful wife or husband, a parent crippled or sick year after year, with no cure possible, the daughter forced to renounce her own life and look after an invalid relative? As spiritual people, what is our response to such situations? Swami A. gave a marvelous example of how to deal with them. He chose to martyrize himself, to endure Mrs. W. and her particular form of malady. If we sincerely believe that our life is directed by Sri Ramakrishna, and that all the events which occur are ordained by him, what other attitude can we take to such impossible people as was Mrs. W. except to practice the splendid virtue of absolute forbearance?

In Swami A. I witnessed a convincing example of this virtue.

10.

This section will deal with Amiya, or Sister Amiya, who joined the British aristocracy in mid-life and became the Countess of Sandwich. She is a historical character, in that for the first part of her life she was intimately connected with the early development of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Then, at fifty, in marrying the Earl of Sandwich, she became linked with the family of the great friends of Swami Vivekananda in the West, the Leggetts. Amiya became, thus, by marriage, a niece once removed of Josephine MacLeod, or Tantine. Any historian considering the wider sweep of the Vivekananda story must take account of Amiya.

But I have chosen instead to treat Amiya in this chapter on "Evidences of the Faith" for another reason. Because she exemplified childlike--yes she remained essentially a little girl all her life, despite highly visible appearances to the contrary--childlike faith in her guru; and secondly because she received from her guru so much "undeserved" grace.

Amiya was born Ella Sully near Glastonbury in Western England in 1902. She was one of nine

daughters. I asked her once if her father had been a farmer. She replied: "Less than that." I take it that he had been a simple agricultural laborer.

She emigrated to the United States in the 1920's in search of employment. For awhile she worked with a sister in Los Angeles as a seamstress. Some time in the early 1930's she made her way up Ivar Hill, in Hollywood, to Sister Lalita's bungalow, to attend a lecture on Vedanta by Swami Prabhavananda. Shortly afterwards she joined the household as a sort of housekeeper. Whether she received a fixed salary or was given according to need some share of the meager offerings left in the Sunday collection plate, I do not know. In any case, she served as aide to the aging Sister Lalita and "right hand man" to the Swami. As years passed other residents joined the household; eventually brahmacharya was given and Ella Sully (or Corbin, since she had married long before, before leaving England) became Sister Amiya.

The newcomers were younger than Amiya and proved to be more adaptable than she to religious life. Amiya was rajasic; she wanted to dress well, to have a good time, to go out. When I joined the Prabhavananda household in 1950 I saw her as a discontented and restless person. Prabhavananda's frequent demands that she make some strenuous effort to deepen her spiritual life did not interest her seriously. Amiya had become a problem to the Center and to herself. Particularly to me; she possessed the authority of long association with the Swami and the Centre, but followed no visible discipline, providing, I felt, a bad example. Once I complained about her to Swami Prabhavananda. He was severe in his reply: "Never judge a situation until you know the end of the story."

It was in 1952 that George Montagu, the 9th Earl of Sandwich, arrived at our center to pay a visit of a couple of weeks. In 1905 he had married Alberta Sturgis, daughter by her first marriage of Mrs. Frances Leggett. In 1912 George and Alberta had visited India, where they had met several of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. George saw Sri Sarada Devi and touched her feet. Swami Premananda, upon meeting George, embraced him. Alberta died in 19???. Three years later George embarked on an ocean cruise which permitted him a stopover in Los Angeles.

George was immediately attracted by Amiya. Although fifty (George was then in his late 70's), she was pretty and animated. George proposed marriage and with the consent of her guru, Amiya accepted. Prabhavananda was distressed to lose her but concluded that marriage to George offered a graceful solution to Amiya's problem and was best for the Center. It was, as the saying goes, stranger than fiction--poor country girl, then Vedanta renunciate, then Countess. The British newspapers were full of the affair for several days.

Amiya had now arrived. She had attained position, money, and a title, far more than anyone in her situation could have hoped for. Yes, she apparently felt some twinges of remorse for having given up the commitment she had made in Hollywood and separating herself by thousands of kilometres from her guru. Amiya was adept at rationalizing as unselfish and beneficial to others the things she herself wanted to do. She said that God had called her to the responsible work of looking after George. So she set out to enjoy her life as a Countess. Of course there were many pleasant experiences, but also a great deal that

was not so pleasant. George's heir and other children were not friendly, and George proved to be not easy as a husband. "Be careful what you wish for," Swami Prabhavananda had often warned, "for you might get it, together with the consequences."

Thus life went on. In 19?? George died, Amiya at his side, reminding him in his last moments to recall, to visualize, Sri Sarada Devi. After his death things were no better, as there was an extremely messy, well-publicized court case over the inheritance. Since there was and never had been any quality of calculation in Amiya's makeup--as I said, she was basically a thoughtless little girl--she defended herself badly and lost.

Amiya's great quality was her absolute reliance upon her guru. During the many years she had lived at the Hollywood ashrama a deep confidence had grown up between the disciple and Prabhavananda. She had always been wayward and thoughtless. Prabhavananda had scolded her innumerable times. On these occasions she had always repented and promised to reform. These new starts were short-lived. But her confidence in her guru never wavered. It was an illustration of the famous illustration of Sri Ramakrishna: "The mother spans the child and the child clings to the mother's knees, weeping, 'Mother, Mother'."

Amiya kept up her relationship with her guru as best she could from such a distance, often talking about him, so that her British friends, worldly and otherwise, knew a great deal about Swami Prabhavananda and admired him sight unseen. She visited him in California as often as she could. But as had always been the case, she didn't do any serious meditation or other spiritual exercises, and lived an essentially frivolous life. For his part, the Swami held her as dear as always, his heedless daughter, sending her regularly strengthening letters and, among other instructions, bidding her undertake to write the life of Sri Sarada Devi from the standpoint of a western woman.

I should like to insert a historical footnote. I spent a few days with Amiya and George at Hinchingsbrooke Castle in 1952. Amiya had found, perhaps in some effects of Alberta's, a few letters from Sister Nivedita written to Alberta. These Amiya later gave to me, and these I arranged to have published in the "Prabuddha Bharata". They are now included in the two-volume collection Letters of Sister Nivedita, edited by Sankari Prasad Basu. A far more interesting discovery was a photograph of Sister Nivedita and Sri Sarada Devi seated together. When Amiya presented it I didn't recall having seen that pose before, but had no idea that no one else had either. When I reached India a few weeks later I showed the photo to Swami Sankarananda, President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. He was astounded, touched the photo to his head, and announced that this was an until then unknown portrait. Obviously taken at the same time as the "classic" poses arranged for by Nivedita and Sara Bull (November, 1898), this print had probably been Nivedita's alone; she had sent to, or left the one copy which existed, with her friend Alberta. All copies of this pose now in circulation are "descendants" of this one original retrieved by Amiya and carried in my luggage from Hinchingsbrooke to Belur Math in October-November of 1952.

Since living in France I was able to visit Amiya several times. It was with her as though the intervening

years had never been. Her thoughts were always there, at the Hollywood center, with Sister Lalita and Swami Prabhavananda. In 1985 she became seriously enfeebled and had to enter a nursing home--curiously enough in Bath not far from where she had been born. She took comfort from the fact that I was for her (as she was for me) a gurubai, and our relation grew very close. Her letters to me, and her conversation when we were together, were all of Home--yes, the old home on Ivar Hill, and the new Home to be, where her guru waited and to which she was ready and even eager to go.

Prabhavananda was fond of saying: "It works, my child. I tell you it really works." What works? Devotion to and absolute faith in the guru. In the unfolding of this curious and curiously comforting story, one finds proof that such is unquestionably the fact.

Amiya died on the morning of 14 February, 1986. The evening before she had had a long telephone conversation with a friend, during which she had again expressed her readiness to quit this world and "go home". At midnight when the nurse came in to give her her medicine, she had had a happy and animated conversation in the same vein. The same thing at five in the morning when she had taken some early morning tea. One hour later, never knowing what had happened, she suffered a sudden, brutal stroke and died instantly. In this last event of her eventful life, the guru, as he had been doing for such a long time, demonstrated once again his compassion for his often wayward, but always loving, daughter.

For some years I contributed a "department" called "Leaves from an Ashram" to the bimonthly revue of the Ramakrishna center in England, "Vedanta for East and West". Amiya's story, thinly disguised, inspired the following.

It had happened more than thirty years ago. I had then been new to the ashrama. It had been my first problem there as a resident. Another disciple, X, far senior to me and older, had been behaving in a fashion that other members and I considered scandalous. How could that be? How could it be allowed to go on? Finally I had gone to the Head and complained, expecting the Head to take disciplinary action against the offender. Nothing of the sort! In fact, whatever disciplining had been meted out had been directed toward me myself, as the Head pronounced severely these words: "Never, never judge till you know the end of the story."

Now, more than a generation later, I recognize that the Head had been right. For recently the story of X had been completed. I'd seen how with the passing years that offending disciple had changed, sweetened, finally died a saint's death. I held in my hand a letter X had sent a few days before the end: "How stupid I was in those early days; I didn't realize it. But thank God our guru never condemned me, and because of his comprehension I somehow gained the courage to keep on. Well, it's almost finished now. I spend my days repeating my mantram, waiting with tranquillity to go Home." Casting my mind back to that ancient episode, I felt ashamed.

And equally "the end of the story" could mean the end of my own story. That too is what

the Head must have meant. For I could see how I was not the same man who had complained against X long before. In these latter years my readiness to judge, to condemn, had quite gone out of me. I had come to see how little exterior signals actually mean. What one takes to be personality traits in others, aspects of their character, revealing actions--on which one bases one's evaluations--these may disguise more than they reveal. They are like camouflage or protective coloration obscuring the truth. "Do we ever," I had often asked myself in recent years, "do we ever have an inkling of what goes on inside other people? Who knows what fear, what sense of inadequacy, what hunger to be loved, what need for recognition form the visage with which people face the world? I was so sure of my own conscientiousness and yet so ready to discover its lack in another. I know now the end of my own story, or practically so, and I now see clearly that judging others is something no one who is the least wise should ever dare to do."

There was another paragraph in X's letter: "As this may be the last time I shall be able to write to you, I wish to make a confessison. All those years ago when you first came to the ashrama some of us found the things you did shocking. I seriously considered complaining to the Head about you, but then I remembered that he was fond of saying, 'Never, never judge until you know the end of the story'. So I'm glad I didn't. As I have watched your development these three decades and seen what a devotee you have become, I know that such an early evaluation would have been hasty and wrong. I'm sorry I ever had such feelings."

I read these lines with burning cheeks.

11.

I shall conclude this chapter and this book by speaking of Gurudas Maharaj, Swami Atulananda--a Hollander who became a swami of the Ramakrishna Order, and recognized by members of the Order as a holy man. He linked Europe and America with India at a period when this concourse was far less frequent than it is now. He took up Indian religious thought at a time when Hinduism was generally regarded by western people as heathenism, and through it reached a wonderful universality of view. In his last years, in his eighties and nineties, he allowed his daily thoughts and recollections to be noted down, and these made up a book which I had the joy of editing, entitled *Atman Alone Abides*. He said in one of his conversations printed in this volume: "If you put these small incidents together they will become a book."

Gurudas Maharaj interests us for at least three reasons. He knew intimately and received the grace of most of the first disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Secondly, he occupies a particular place in the history of the early days of the Ramakrishna movement in the West. And, finally, he himself was a man of real spiritual attainment--a superior, convincing example and evidence of the faith.

I should like to take up these three factors one by one.

Gurudas Maharaj was born in Amsterdam on February 7, 1870, the son of a prosperous tea merchant. He was the seventh of eight children. His name was Cornelius J. Heijblom. The religious background of the family was Protestantism, strict and serious. The boy graduated from an agricultural college and before the turn of the century, as was so common in those days, emigrated to the United States. He lived in and around New York City, gaining his livelihood as office worker, and at times as coachman and farm hand.

In the nineteenth century Indian thought had penetrated American life to a very modest extent through the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and the New England Transcendentalists. It was only in 1893, with Swami Vivekananda's success at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, that Hindu ideas became known to the public at large. Vivekananda's lecture tours in the United States and England during the following years resulted in a certain acceptance of Indian thought and the formation of several Vedanta study groups. To look after these groups, Vivekananda dispatched others of the first disciples of Sri Ramakrishna to the West: Swami Abhedananda, Swami Saradananda, and Swami Turiyananda. The fifth direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna to come to the West was Swami Trigunatitananda, who taught in the United States from 1903 until 1915.

Some twenty-five years after the events, Gurudas Maharaj wrote about his original contacts with these swamis in articles which became a book entitled *With the Swamis in America*. He tells how in 1898 he became a student of Swami Abhedananda, how he met Swami Vivekananda briefly in 1899 and 1900, and how during that same year he went to California to live in the ashrama of Swami Turiyananda. In succeeding years in India, Gurudas Maharaj kept up his relation with Swami Turiyananda, also making the acquaintance of several of the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna: Swami Brahmananda, Swami Premananda, and Swami Shivananda. Indeed, Gurudas Maharaj met all the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna except Swami Yogananda and Swami Niranjanananda. And, as we shall see, he knew Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother.

As Gurudas Maharaj explained it, he had from the beginning found his own Protestantism confining and illogical. Thus when he heard the Vedantic teaching of Swami Abhedananda he was attracted. As he says, "It was as though a sudden revelation had opened up. I knew all at once that this was Truth." Instructed by Swami Abhedananda, he commenced regular religious practices. Being single, he was able to devote his spare time to helping out at Swami Abhedananda's small center. In due course, the Swami gave this young man the vows of brahmacharya, the first vows of a Hindu monk. He received the name-in-religion of Gurudas, which means "servant of the guru". The word Maharaj came to be added years later, a title of respect often applied in India to those who have renounced the world.

Although he was now a brahmachari, Gurudas Maharaj continued to earn his livelihood and live in his own quarters. But through Swami Turiyananda a brand of monastic life became possible. Swami Vivekananda had been given some uninhabited acreage in the San Antonio Valley, a day's hard travel by the transport of that period from San Francisco. Swami Turiyananda, although carrying on some public work at San Francisco, decided to put his major effort toward building up a center of study and meditation on this acreage, which he called the Shanti Ashrama, or peace retreat. In 1900, Brahmachari

Gurudas was there.

The story of this pioneering effort has been told by Gurudas Maharaj in his *With the Swamis in America*; also by one of the original members, Ida Ansell (Ujjvala) in a vivid account originally published in the revue "Vedanta and the West" in 1952. In recent years this sojourn of Americans in the desert with their Indian teacher has been recounted by Swami Ritajananda in a book entitled *The Life of Swami Turiyananda*. It was a bold experiment to take a dozen Americans into the California wilderness. The climate and geographical factors were not very favorable: the epoch of the Wild West was not very many years in the past. Facilities had to be built up from scratch. The most elementary concepts of Hindu thought had to be imparted to these pioneers. What Swami Turiyananda was apparently aiming for was the establishment of the forest hermitage existence of ancient Hindustan, where people lived in a simple way, worked as capable of working to sustain the community, devoting themselves to study and to personal advancement. Shanti Ashrama bore some resemblance to the so-called Utopian communities such as the Mennonites, whose inception had been a part of the American scene from the earliest days, even to the so-called hippie communes of the recent past. A similar colony, called the Lord's Farm, existed for a time on the east coast of the United States, of which Gurudas Maharaj had been a member briefly before going to the Shanti Ashrama. The feature that marked Shanti Ashrama was the presence, as director, of an advanced spiritual leader, Swami Turiyananda, and when he went back to India, as he did in 1902, Shanti Ashrama was no longer a retreat for continuous living.

Gurudas Maharaj was at Shanti Ashrama from the beginning and continued to live there even after its brief golden hour was finished. He was the right-hand man of Swami Turiyananda, and Swami Turiyananda's friend. One of the most valuable features of *Atman Alone Abides* is the portrait and interpretation Gurudas Maharaj gave concerning Swami Turiyananda.

Although Gurudas Maharaj wanted to be a monk and, technically, was a monk, there were in the early days of this century no Ramakrishna monasteries in the West. Today there are several. So in 1906 he went to live in India, to take up his place in the Order inspired by Sri Ramakrishna in 1886 and founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897. When I met Gurudas Maharaj for the first time in Kankhal in 1953 (I had a second meeting with him at the same place ten years later) we talked--somewhat as two expatriots might when finding themselves far from home--about the problems the westerner encounters in trying to live in India. This is a difficult transition to make today; and it was much more so in 1906. Gurudas Maharaj found the manners strange, the food not at all good for him, conveniences he would consider fundamental simply nonexistent. He could not stand India physically and at the end of two years was forced to return to the United States. But, as he told me in his characteristically amused manner, "the call of the orient" again became strong; and in 1911 he tried the transfer again, again at the end of five years with the same result.

Finally, in 1922, Gurudas Maharaj made the third effort, and this time he stayed, until his death on August 10, 1966. By the time of this third try he had learned prudence. As he explained it to me, he finally decided not to try to be the complete Indian. Some modest financial aid from a brother in London allowed him to provide for himself enough comfort and sufficient food of the sort suitable for him so as to be able to maintain his health even in India. He chose to live in the north, in winter at a big center at

Kankhal, 22 kilometres down from Rishikesh, and at a mountain station in Barlowganj, near Mussourie, in summer.

I asked Gurudas Maharaj in 1953: "Do you think you made the right choice in 1922? Do you ever feel homesick for the West?" He replied: "Even if I had had regrets about never seeing the West again, I could have none now at eighty-three. It is nice to be elderly in India. In the good old U.S.A. you're not wanted when you are aged. But here elderly people are respected. Look at the way they love and spoil me! In India old age is really an advantage."

Perhaps this is a good place to describe Gurudas Maharaj. He had the white skin and blue eyes of a Hollander--very striking in a country where dark eyes and dark skin are the norm. What was visible of his hair--for he kept his head shaved as most sadhus do--was reddish. He was small, and it seemed a wonder that he was able in his youth to have worked as a coachman and farm aid. A fall from a horse had given him a permanently injured back. When I saw him in 1953 he walked with a cane. Years before in the U.S.A. he had been fitted with a leather corsette for his back, and in 1953 he was still making it do. He told me: "Now it is a race. My corsette is awfully old. It's become a question of which will hold out longer. Will I give out before the corsette does, or will it give out before I do?"

During his first two sojourns in India Gurudas Maharaj had had the good fortune to associate with several direct disciples--that is to say, men of realization--of Sri Ramakrishna, as well as other persons of spiritual and historical eminence. Although he had taken brahmacharya from Swami Abhedananda years before in the United States, Gurudas Maharaj realized that he had never been given a diksha mantram. It was arranged for him to receive this initiation from Sri Sarada Devi during his second sojourn in India. On his first visit Gurudas Maharaj traveled through Kashmir and up to the famous Amarnath shrine in the company of Swami Turiyananda, Swami Premananda, and Swami Shivananda. In 1907 he attended the surya-grahna mala at Kurukshetra in the company of Swami Turiyananda. Some of the time during the first stay in India he lived at Swami Vivekananda's Himalayan monastery at Mayavati; there exists a historic photograph of him taken there, probably in 1907, together with Sister Nivedita, Sister Christine, Mrs. Charlotte Sevier, Mrs. Sara Bull, and Swami Virajananda, all disciples of Swami Vivekananda, and all important figures in the early history of the Ramakrishna movement.

In 1923 Gurudas Maharaj was given his final vows, of sannyas, and became Swami Atulananda. This occurred at Belur Math, in the presence of many swamis, including Swami Abhedananda. It is the President of the Order who administers these vows. Swami Shivananda was then the President. But when it came Gurudas Maharaj's turn, Swami Shivananda stepped aside in favor of Swami Abhedananda, requesting him, who had initiated Gurudas Maharaj into religious life twenty-five years before in New York, to confirm him in the austere engagements of sannyas.

As the years went by, other historical figures died, and Gurudas Maharaj himself became a celebrity. Indians, both monastic and lay, planned for years to go on a pilgrimage to the Himalayan foothills, in order to see him. And devotees from the West, hearing of him and feeling for him a kind of patriotic pride, as was my case, made a point to journey up to Kankhal when visiting India. One American, who

visited Gurudas Maharaj in 1966 and recorded his impressions, was Swami Yogeshananda. Following are excerpts from his account:

It was in the summer of 1966 that I made my way to Barlowganj to make a pilgrimage visit to Swami Atulananda.... By this time the cancer on his face was far advanced, he had become very silent, and one could understand it would not be long before he would take his leave. I stayed in the room sometimes when his wound was being dressed [he had a cancer on the forehead which eventually affected one eye], and saw the difficulties with which he contended in the daily routine of living, and the only thing which made it bearable for me as witness was the distinct feeling that he was himself the witness, patient, enduring, detached. Truly his forbearance seemed marvelous. He said that he was not in much pain; this was difficult to believe from the nature of the case.

Often I had just to sit in his presence, because it was rare at that time that he would speak more than a few sentences. Nevertheless, I will give here what little conversations I had with him, in substance.

Gurudas Maharaj told me that he had never tried to go through a summer in Bengal. He had arrived at Belur Math in June, and Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) had told him it would be too hot for him, so he should go to Mayavati. When I said that I was having difficulties even now, in these more convenient days, he said, "Oh, baba!" and laughed heartily. Then he added, "And I wore western clothes!" (in which certain functions of the day become complicated.) More laughter. He first adopted Indian dress at Almora. When he went to Mayavati, Mrs. Sevier was there. He characterized her for me in four words: short, active, intelligent, kindly. He remembered his talk with the famous missionary Dr. E. Stanley Jones, which the latter reported in his book *Christ at the Round Table*, and he spoke of him as a great preacher. He remembered Ujjvala, and remarked that she had got along very well for one with a physical handicap.

In answer to questions, he said that the Holy Mother had talked to him through an interpreting brahmachari, that he had seen Sister Nivedita in Calcutta and in New York, and had also seen Sister Christine.

He asked about the view from my room (the southernmost, which looked out over the valley below and down to Dehra Dun). I expressed my appreciation of it. Kankhal, he said, had no such view.

"Now comes a very important question," he said with gravity, but also with a twinkle in his eyes. "Which is better, the American doughnut, or the Scottish one such as this lady made for me?" (A devotee had brought some she had made.) Everyone laughed at this. Then I told him several funny incidents about Swami Madhavananda which he enjoyed.

I asked Gurudas Maharaj if one can meditate as well sitting in a chair as in lotus position. "Yes, theoretically," was his answer. To the question whether he had ever been able to sit in a full lotus posture, he nodded his head; but I did not feel sure that he had understood the question. A certain gentleman who was staying at the guesthouse nearby and visiting the Swami told me that when he had come to him in 1953 for darshan and some instruction, the Swami had given him the book *The Way of the Pilgrim* and told him to read it.

"Have you come to appreciate Indian music after this long time, Maharaj?" I queried one day. "Yes," said the Swami, "but not the voice." His attendant explained, "Instrumental music only."

I made him an apple pie of sorts, using the materials available there, and had the privilege of feeding him a few spoonfuls myself. I asked him about the direct disciples of the Master, and he said he had seen all of them except Swami Niranjanananda and Swami Yogananda.

The first day I was there at the ashrama he asked, while sitting up in the morning, where I was. The attendant replied that I was sitting in my room. "But he did not come here to sit in his room," Gurudas Maharaj remarked. Thereafter I felt emboldened to spend more time with him.

His attendant told him that I could speak a little Bengali. "Very little, Maharaj," I demurred. His eyes twinkled as so often they did. "Just enough," he commented, "to put me to shame." All laughed. Then the attendant reminded him that he used to speak a little Hindi. Last year, he said, when a certain visitor had come, the Swami had spoken to him in Hindi. His answer was, "Last year has gone: so has the Hindi."

The fact that he was regarded as a celebrity was a source of amusement to Gurudas Maharaj. He had become a spectator of the passing show--or as he called it, this dream that we are all dreaming--and observed the character he himself was required to play with a mild mocking detachment. He took neither the world seriously nor himself. This characteristic humor and frankness come through in the conversations which make up *Atman Alone Abides*. Indeed I as editor found it necessary to soft-pedal certain remarks, and the publisher considered it necessary to add numerous "explanatory" footnotes. At times this quality might appear to the ordinary observer to be somewhat "putting-off"; there seemed to be something ironic in Gurudas Maharaj's tone. He himself says he was inclined to be critical. Well, he was a realist in the Vedantic sense, and this attitude occasionally made him appear to be a harsh iconoclast.

When Ujjvala died she left, as I have related, many mementoes. Among these was a collection of letters which Gurudas had written to her for forty or fifty years, most of them from India. I kept these safely after Ujjvala's death, hoping to look through them when I had the leisure and maybe publish excerpts.

But it did not seem right that I should remove them from the Southern California center when I moved to France. I was thus pleased to hear that the collection was confided to one of the nuns at Santa Barbara, who typed copies of them all--not an easy task, as the writing was minute to begin with, and faded. That personality I have described above, and which is visible throughout *Atman Alone Abides* comes out forcefully in the letters, many of which have been published in *With the Swamis in America and India*. I cannot resist quoting portions from several. I begin with one dated September 5, 1925--about the time of the famous Scopes Monkey Trial.

I used to be somewhat annoyed at Sri Ramakrishna's attitude and replies to questions. His "I don't know." "Mother knows." "Mother can do anything." I see the wonderful wisdom of it now. Who knows anything in this mass of mystery? Certain things may have happened for a million years, and we call it a law of nature. But what is a million years with God? It is less than a second. If the human mind should change ever so little a new universe with different laws would reveal itself. I used to fight tooth and nail the idea that anything could happen not in accordance with established natural law. The old story [in Ramakrishna's life] of the white flower on a bush of red species of flower. Today I believe all things possible. I believe in miracles. As Swami Saradananda once told me, we don't know the subtler laws of nature. The bhakta comes in contact with these subtler laws. Hence they appear as mysterious miracles to others. All Ramakrishna's experiences are opposed to the science of today. Science says, "Impossible" and rejects. "Mother, you know everything; you can do everything. I want to love you and be your child." This to me seems to be wisdom. And let the scientists fight, and let the fundamentalists fight; good for them. We have all been fighters. Now let us have a little peace. Now let us retire from the arena and become onlookers and enjoy it.

If only we could look upon all life as fun instead of taking things so seriously. "Meet life merrily," says Nivedita, "and know that it is all Mother's play." There is the secret! Mother laughs because she is not attached. We weep because we are attached. She involves herself and evolves again. And she thinks it is great fun. We involve and entangle ourselves and then we weep and moan and indulge in self-pity during the process of evolving and disentangling. "Know the Atman and be free." And then play at anything you like. That is what life should be. And then all life becomes beautiful. It is only a question of angle of vision. With the right vision there is no evil, no ugliness, no sadness. It is all part of a wonderful drama or dream. How different everything looks when we stand apart as witness.

...All these words mean the same in the Shanti state. I have gone beyond that. But I never wanted Truth for truth's sake but because it brings happiness. I know that true happiness consists in knowing myself, my Atman. I do not find happiness in the world. Therefore I try to realize the Atman. And the Jnana path appeals to me because that leads to Self-knowledge, and seems more reasonable to me.

By the way, do you know that Christian saints warn against the sensuous in religion? But

we have to pass through it. It is only when we realize our Atman that we rise above sensuousness. Then it is pure bliss. That is super or beyond ordinary sensuousness, just as knowing the Self is super or beyond selfishness. It is an absolute state where ordinary feelings cease. So worldly beauty is one thing, spiritual beauty another. And I do not confound the two. But in the end it is all beauty. Turiyananda was appreciative of beauty. I saw that on our pilgrimages. He loved beautiful scenery. Still he told me then to my surprise, "I don't care for external beauty. I want the internal beauty." I understand it now, but did not then. He loved external beauty but it did not suffice. He found another and greater beauty of the spiritual realm. I love beauty but it is just a fleeting sensation. Spiritual beauty (that comes with spiritual realization) has a lasting effect. It changes the person for the better, while external beauty has not that effect on me. It leaves me as I am now.

Here is the Swami speaking in another voice, on 13 October of that same year:

Personally I prefer Mother's calmer aspects. I love our little river way down the valley, and miles and miles of hills, tier after tier, ending in snow-capped mountains, and the rosy clouds drifting along below my verandah, and giant eagles floating on their wings; circling in the air they look like tiny dark spots against the heavens. And the bird singing in the pines, and the monkeys stealing our apples, and cowherds playing their flutes, and the villagers working their little fields--all this is a joy to me that I can enjoy from my room window or verandah. Then, no noise, no confusion, everyone quietly going about his business, each one of us in our own way, without criticizing or interfering with the others. Still all are friendly. This is my life here. And I only wish you could enjoy it with me. But who knows? Perhaps you would find it dull, inane, a stupid life. You might see only laziness, dirt, inefficiency, and other evils of India.

I love nature, insect life, animal life, flowers, the peasants . I can understand St. Francis of Assisi singing in the hills, talking to the birds, the wolf and the flowers. Glorious St. Francis! And his sweet, pure, clean relationship with St. Clare, who mothered him, loved him, understood him.

It is a question of temperament. I like the outdoor life, open country, a few friends. So I did not get much at your Pentacostal meetings, crowded with converted and half-converted, and temporarily converted drunkards and gamblers and brothel keepers. I have just read the life of Mrs. White, Seventh Day Adventist. Marvelous in a way, living in visions and doing the Lord's work. But it gave me the creeps. Sickly from her childhood, all her life, still marrying and bringing weaklings into the world, having to leave her children in the care of others [in order to go out] to do the Lord's work. My nature revolts against it. Compare that with the pure, clean life of the Swamis, though they don't have visions and go into trances. And what did she get in her samadhis? That Sabbath must be kept on Saturday, that the world would soon come to an end, that she must convert people. I prefer the old Catholic saints who did not have a brood of children. Who cares for

speaking in tongues when one can read the Gita, Upanishads, Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji's works. Certainly we are fortunate. Think of the Crest Jewel of Wisdom and then turn to Pentacostal literature. You fall from the mountain peak into the gutter. I know you don't approve of my aristocratic taste, but as Vedantists we have a right to be fastidious. There is no sense in cultivating bad taste.

You understand, I don't condemn the Pentacostals. They are doing a wonderful work that I could not do. But we belong to another constellation; we have another sun to illumine us. Our orbit is free from smut. It is always toward greater purity....Is it accident that brought me to India for the third time? No! I could not be satisfied with anything but the very best. I could not swallow molasses after having tasted nectar.

Here is Gurudas Maharaj again writing Ujjvala, the 29 March,1928:

Life is a mystery; we are not sure of anything, cannot predict anything, are usually wrong in our judgment of others, cannot believe anything--not even our senses--cannot disbelieve anything. Maya indeed! But there is a way out, a path leading beyond Maya. This is our consolation. I seem to be looking at life in a more impersonal way. The faults of others do not distress me at all.

Mother India [a sensational book of the 1920's criticizing India] was simply an interesting phenomenon, a curious working of the human mind. Nivedita went to the other extreme--just as interesting. Some of our swamis are saintly, others have to be driven from the Mission. All equally interesting, all are studies, all Mother's play. No one to praise, no one to blame--all Mother's children. A right step, a false step--all part of the play. That is why it always amuses me when you hide things, when you want to protect people's reputations....I neither believe nor disbelieve. I see and hear, and then it is gone. Let others form opinions, judge, criticize. To me, life is a moving picture. See it and forget it. Don't close your eyes, don't take sides. What I want now is to be able to include myself in the picture, to be the mere witness to myself also--in pain, in pleasure, in health and sickness, in good deeds and bad deeds. Look on, stand aside, see what this funny creature Gurudasa is doing. And know that I am not this: that I am free, the Atman--that all are free, the Atman.

What we see are the actors on the stage--today beggar, tomorrow king, today sinner, tomorrow saint. It is always the same person playing different parts. So it is difficult to shock me or make me feel different toward persons even if they make a mistake.

Take M. I am now convinced that he plays the part of an irresponsible creature. So I protect myself. But my feeling towards him is not changed. I will receive him if he comes just as before. It is an interesting study of human behavior. What more? What less? If you ask me, can you trust him? I don't try to hide or to protect him from you. I say, be careful.

He may fool you. But that does not mean that I wish him ill or that I am not ready to stand by him. Only I know that if I or you lend him money, there is a good chance of never seeing your money again. But if I can spare it, I may give it to him. Why not? Let him have his fun, get his experience. Mother's child, Mother's play.

And I am glad to meet all characters, just as I am glad to read about them. I am as interested in Dempsey [Jack Dempsey, prizefighter] and Barnum [circus-master] etc. as in the saints. I would be just as much interested to meet them, or to see them in action. Books for India, books against India--they are equally interesting to me, if they are written equally well.

Let the play go on. Turiyananda once told me that when he read that when Krishna made the designs for his capital he designed one part of the city for prostitutes to live. Swami was horrified. Why did he allow prostitutes in his ideal city? Then, later he understood. They also have a right to live--they fill their place in the picture, they do their share in the play. Without them the play would not be complete. Let each choose his own part; let him play it well. And when he wants to change his part--all right--others may take it. Each part brings its own results, its own pay.

No swami claims to be perfect. Many will say, "It is only through Mother's grace that I am not worse than I am." This is wisdom, knowledge of life. But only old, tried, experienced souls know this. Why do people feel attracted to a rascal and run away from a saint? Because a rascal is true; an all-saint is a myth. If he is held up as an all-saint by his so-called friends and protectors, we know we are being humbugged. It is namby-pamby silliness. Swamiji did not care a snap whether a person was good or bad, but he hated hiding--covering sores with flowers. And you know how Turiyananda used to wrinkle up his nose at "good" people. Jesus said: "Why callest me good? No one is good, but my Father who is in Heaven "

On his sixty-first birthday, 7 February, 1931, Gurudas Maharaj wrote to Ujjvala:

I remember once I saw or experienced, or what you may call it, realized beyond a doubt, that we are all Atman, souls, and our earthly individualities are only like reflections of the souls. And with it came the knowledge that this life is unreal, and what fools we are to take it seriously, to hate and be jealous and quarrel, and all that. I saw it as absolute lunacy, for in reality we are all equal, Spirit, blissful, beyond love and hatred, all equally free, perfect, beyond all desires. Think of what a heaven life would be for me if I could have retained that consciousness. There would have been only love, love for all and for everything, for all life is only a reflection of our ignorant mind. No good, no bad, life only a shadow play to enjoy if we realize it as such. I am the soul, immortal; life, my own shadow on this world of Maya. This is Truth, for I have experienced it also in other forms. And this is really my religion, the one thing in religion of which I am certain. I have

known moments that you might have cut my body to pieces and I would have laughed while it was going on. I would have been the witness, detached from the body, enjoying the fun. And now, when I have a toothache or a headache I am undone. This world has become real again. Still, I know that this world-reality is relative, while the spirit-reality is absolute. Religion means only the attempt to attain the spirit-consciousness, and to retain it. All else in religion is 90 per cent bunk, or as Swamiji says, "lower truth".

From a historical standpoint Gurudas Maharaj is significant as the first occidental sannyasin of the Ramakrishna Order. This is not quite accurate. In 1895 Swami Vivekananda initiated two American men and one American woman into sannyas, but the men did not maintain their engagement, and the woman did not continue in rapport with the Ramakrishna Order. But Gurudas Maharaj was faithful from 1898 onwards, even though for long periods he was forced to live outside Vedanta institutions. With the development of an extensive monastic program among Ramakrishna centers in the West, Gurudas Maharaj assumes the character of forerunner and patron. He was Our First Success, and thus is seen as hero and admired as example. At the present time it is relatively easy for a European or American to ally himself with the Ramakrishna movement and advance in it, either at home or in India--there are at least a half-dozen western centers sponsoring monastic programs, which have up to now produced around a score of sannyasins; but for Gurudas Maharaj it was a case of hardship and fidelity.

Now that there is a large Vedanta following in Holland and a Ramakrishna center there, Gurudas Maharaj becomes a hero in another sort of way. National pride cherishes the idea that this modern western holy man was born in that country.

But of course the most interesting thing about Gurudas Maharaj is that he was a knower of God. That this is a fact can be established in two ways: on the basis of internal evidence, and on the basis of external evidence.

The internal evidence is frequently encountered in Atman Alone Abides. One can look, for example, at the entry of March 15, 1958. Gurudas Maharaj says that he experienced, as he describes it, a perception of the Atman as pervading all. He sensed the Truth and felt himself to be essentially one with that Truth, entirely distinct from the world of dreams. To his old friend Ujjvala he spoke even more clearly, in his letters, as we have seen.

The external evidence resides in the regard which other members of the Order had for him. Anyone living in a religious community for decades is bound to be thoroughly known by its other members for what he is. If Gurudas Maharaj was considered to be highly advanced by his colleagues, we may be sure that he was so. In 1963 I was discussing Gurudas Maharaj with Swami Vireswarananda, then the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order. He later became President, in which post he remained until his death in 1985. We were talking of Swami Vivekananda's dream that western monastics should go to teach in the West and that western monastics should go to live in India, there to do practical work for the Order and nation. That the first part of the proposition had been carried out there could be no doubt. But not the second part. I remarked to Swami Vireswarananda that it seemed to me that Gurudas Maharaj in

his many years in India had not accomplished much beyond the writing of one small book and a few articles. (In those days I thought practical work to mean active endeavor such as publishing, teaching, doctoring, construction, and the like. I didn't think of self-development and inspiration of others as work!) To which Swami Vireswarananda responded, with a touch of heat: "But Gurudas Maharaj became spiritual."

As I said in the introduction written for *Atman Alone Abides*, "Here the reader is allowed to observe the thinking processes of a jnani. Jnana is an austere way; it has not much truck with the vanities, the whimsicalities, of everyday life. One may be put off in places, by what seems like cynicism, even hilarity, as regards the concerns of men. But this would be the likely result if one had known the Atman and seen the world of appearance, with its sweet and sour, its lighting both clear and obscure, its good and bad, to be perfectly unreal. Atman alone abides; all the rest is too ephemeral to be taken seriously.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Epilogue

I am at Saas-Fee once more, or as I prefer to call this Swiss village honored by Swami Vivekananda's presence more than ninety years ago, Mayavati West. We are in mid-January, 1993. A short while ago I passed the Grand Hotel where Swamiji stayed for two weeks in August, 1896, stared up at the windows facing the mountains and the glaciers, and imagined him looking out from one of those windows, relaxed, happy, and exalted. I climbed down the Chapel Walk bordered by its wayside shrines in which nearly full-size manakins portray episodes from the life and death of Christ, and entered the Chapel Hohen Stiege. Kneeling there before the Virgin erect on her baroque altar, the Child in her arms, I saw in memory once again Mrs. Sevier coming in and laying on that very altar Swamiji's offering of wildflowers, given to the Mother in thanksgiving for having saved him from a fall over the cliff which borders the Chapel Walk.

Here where I feel Swamiji's presence so keenly I have completed this book. In the clear light of his compassionate face I have gone through the text again, checking facts, smoothing out the language, reappraising the author's motives, re-evaluating his honesty. Have I done well? Is the result something I can offer to my guru, to my gurubais, to Swamiji, to Sri Ramakrishna? A fairly firm Yes.

This morning before dawn, looking out across the sleeping, snowy village to the high Alps luminous in the moonglow, I asked myself: "Has my appearance on this earth been of any value; will my absence make any difference?" One takes this sort of inventory at my age. I think not. It would be to claim too much to believe that one's presence "here below" had had much effect on anyone else. Existence's principal value is for oneself; one is granted these brief stopovers in this vale of tears, in this mansion of mirth, for the personal evolutionary opportunities they afford.

Did it work? The Making of a Devotee is an account of the decision which I made forty-five years ago, of why I made it, and of what followed. I took that decision because I felt I must try to modify the direction in which I was going, to change a way of life I had become convinced was untenable. From the vantage point of 1993 can I say that what I hoped to achieve when I said good-bye to "all that" and crossed the Great Divide to Vedanta produced what I hoped it might? A fairly firm Yes.

A famous passage in the Seventh Dialogue of the Bhagavad-Gita states that there are four main motivations which incline men to religion, or more accurately, that men, finding themselves in one or the other of four different situations, turn to religion: the person in distress; the man intent on seeking wisdom; the hungerer after earthly happiness; and the man endowed with spiritual discrimination.

It is perfectly clear to which category I belong. I was never the second type, whom we may think of as a naturally religious person bent on ferreting out the secrets of the spirit. I was not motivated by a wish to obtain fame, fortune, or sense enjoyments (the third type) as are those who practice a religion of success. It is equally clear that I was never a mystic, drawn to God for God's sake, for love of God, as are those belonging to the fourth class. No, I was clearly a member of the first category--the least admirable. I was

scared. My motivation was compounded of ninety per cent self-interest and about ten per cent nostalgia for Wholesomeness. I was looking for an insurance policy, a lifeboat, an escape route--something to get me through the spate of life which remained to me, and painlessly past the demise which was bound to come. Dialogue Seven states it brutally: "Men take refuge in me to escape the fear of old age and death."

There seemed only one way to do this, and that was to become a devotee, whose ups and downs this book has tried to depict. Did it work? Have I then made good use of the years allowed me? Have I somehow made it at least part way from darkness to light, from death to immortality? As I say, a fairly firm Yes. Not because of any spectacular personal enterprise, but because a kindly force threw so many useful chances my way. Now at last I would know what to say were I back in Lansing, Michigan, at the First Methodist Church, and were asked to stand up and give my testimony.

It is now seven years since I lost Chris, Amiya, and my first friend, Joe Cherwinski, and longer years since I lost so many others. I recall a tender remark of Sri Sarada Devi's which Swami Prabhavananda liked to quote: "Premananda has died, So-and-So has died, So-and-So has died; I must be very old." This is my situation.

It is difficult to imagine being dead. I have loved this life, so filled with beauty and punctuated by surprises. I am loath to depart. As to the hereafter, I have absolutely no opinion. Shall I retain some semblance of this personality after death, or at least a souvenir of who I was? That is to say, shall I remember that I was a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, a friend of Vivekananda, and a devotee? Shall I see again and compare notes with my "loved ones"--so many of whom have been named in these pages? But Sri Ramakrishna's promise was that those who have come "here" (to him), for them this is their last life. This statement leaves me in a quandary. If there is no further life, then what is there? A state of no "this", no "is", and no "their"? Probably, but that's absurdly hard to imagine and somehow not very appealing. On the other hand, I feel sure that God is a gentleman, and when I arrive in his domain will deal with this guest graciously--if for no other reason because the tenets of Eastern hospitality, demand it. On this saucy note--as is my wont--I desist.

I suddenly think of Ujjvala, of something she recalled from her days with Vivekananda in 1900. In one of his lectures Swamiji said, "If a bad time comes, what of that? The pendulum must swing back to the other side. But that is no better. The thing to do is to stop it." Then he uttered the American expression which children used to use when swinging, when they would stop pumping and let the swing slow down to a halt: "Let the old cat die." Yes, so many years of pumping, up and down, forward and backward, excited, perspiration on the forehead, trying to make my swing go higher than that of the other kids! Only a play, which seemed so important. But now the supper bell is ringing. Am I willing to stop pumping and let the old cat die? Will Swamiji be there to help me alight? Once again, a fairly firm Yes.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Last Instructions Letter by Swami Vidyatmananda (also know as John Yale or Prema) Concerning His Book, The Making of a Devotee.

Gretz, 28 August, 1992

To Arlen Wolpert, Cambridge, Mass., USA

Dear Arlen

This letter contains my thinking about my manuscript, The Making of a Devotee. I am placing a copy of this letter in the envelope containing my 'last instructions'.

As you know, I would like very much that this book, on which I have worked so long and which contains what may be considered a valuable record of the experiences of an early western Vedantist, should if possible be published. Preferably during my lifetime, or if that does not materialize, then posthumously. I know and am pleased by the fact that you share this attitude.

When the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order was here last August, I spoke with him in general terms about the accepted procedure as regards a literary work produced by one of the Order's members. He stated that the work should be considered as being the property of the Order and that if found acceptable following a reading at the Headquarters, the work should be published by one of the agencies of the Order. Any hint of surreptitious publication should be avoided. These provisions are stated in the Introduction, which you have read.

I believe then that I must--now that the whole book is to all intents and purposes finished--submit the manuscript to the Order and accept its judgment concerning possible publication. Since I have taken refuge in the Order of Ramakrishna, I must have confidence in that Order and its judgments as reflecting the will of its Founder. Why should I prejudge, as I have had a tendency to do, the attitude of the Order to be negative without giving the Order a chance to see what the work consists of?

The big problem in following this course has always been--to whom should I entrust the manuscript for a judgment? Swami Ritajananda read the book some time ago, but made no comments. Just recently I begin to see a solution to this problem. There is a youngish swami in India with whom I have been friendly--he seemed rather more 'hep' than most--he is now a Trustee and head of the influential center at Madras. Some time ago I sent a manuscript to him--Leaves from an Ashrama--which it seems he likes and probably will publish. He is someone in whom I have confidence; I like the way he has approached the Leaves project. If I live long enough I can tackle the matter of the big book after seeing how things go with this smaller one.

I appreciate your interest in the book and the fact that you too are anxious that it should be, in one way or another, permitted the light of day. But I feel efforts to 'go around' the Order should be avoided. In sending you disquettes containing the entire manuscript, I see your function as that of 'literary agent'

acting for the Order in America and possibly England in case the Order approves the book and would like to see it published in the West. Also giving you a copy of the book in this fashion is a means of leaving with you an expression of my affection for you, whether or not the book is ever published.

This is my present attitude, following the deliberations we had together the evening before your departure in late July. I hope that you agree with and will accept this judgment.

Yours affectionately,

(signed) Prema

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)

Some Sayings of My Guru

A talk by Swami Vidyatmananda on his Guru, Swami Prabhavananda, given in 1981 at the Hollywood Temple of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

It is with the most profound emotion that I find myself in this position in which for many years I had the great joy in seeing the Swami Prabhavananda.

I remember clearly the first time I came here and viewed from where you are sitting now him sitting here, on a wooden box, a kind of elevated asana (seat). Probably it was in December of 1948. I walked in that door, took a seat on the aisle, looked at this chapel, with its marvellous candles and decorations, and the smell of incense, and I thought "Well, well, well!" (Laughter) Because thirty-two or thirty-three years ago Hindu things were simply not as common as they are today, and I was a person who had a conservative religious background. People were not making the change from protestantism or atheism in those days to Vedanta with as much facility as they are now. And I wondered, "Well, can I make the great modification of that sort." I was convinced that the Truth was truly to be found in Vedanta. And later, of course, I realised that the Teacher here was one capable of helping find that Truth.

The real conversion occurred on New Year's Eve that same year. We had then, as I believe one still has - and we have taken it up since then in Gretz - a custom of doing arati* at midnight. And I was here. And as the arati was performed, and we could hear the sound of jubilation rising from below (laughter) I thought, "Well, I guess I've made it to the other side." (all laugh) Particularly that marvellous "Chant the Name of the Lord and His Glory, especially the lines

That my heart may burn away with its desire
And the world without Thee is a heartless void.**

That I knew was really the Truth, but to realise it, of course, that's something else. That really takes years.

So, that was how it all began, and I never thought I would be here in this position, saying these words, but I'm thankful that I am.

So what shall we talk about this evening? I was reflecting on it all afternoon and I thought, well, all of us here have either known Swami Prabhavananda or heard about him, and why not simply recall together as old friends some of the things that he taught us, some of his sayings which I remember, and so I've made a list of half a dozen or so to remind you, and remind myself.

I had an interesting experience yesterday when arriving at the Immigration. The Immigration officer said, "Well, what is your occupation?"

Now, as we reach a certain point in our life we really begin to ask ourselves, what is our occupation? Because what we think had been all these years, we find it really isn't at all.

So I thought, well, what am I? Am I a farmer? It's true that we have a farm at Gretz and we do quite a lot of farm work, but I wouldn't say I'm a farmer.

Am I a hotel-keeper? (laughter) That is perhaps a bit more to the point (all laugh). Because, as you know, Gretz welcomes people who come to make retreats there, and we try to make them as comfortable as we can.

Am I a writer? Well, maybe a little, but not really.

A speaker? Certainly not.

An animateur? That's the word in French. You can say it easily in English - animater. It's a very good French word and it means the kind of person that in an organisation, or in an association, sort of makes things go. You might say the sports-master on a cruise ship would be an example of an animateur. Yes, to some extent.

Then I thought, No, I'm none of those things. What I am is - the only thing I am - a devotee. We finally end up realising that all else is of little interest, of passing interest, but our occupation as well as our avocation is to be a devotee. You realise that at a certain point.

So let me look at the list I made of things that we have learned.

After I took sannyas, Swami told me the following: "Nothing - remember, nothing bad can ever happen to you again. It may be bad, it may seem bad, but it won't be bad for you."

Now that's a very curious statement. Because it seems to contradict itself. But if you reflect a little bit on it you see exactly what it means. It means this - that, having put yourself in His hands, having taken your stand as a devotee - both as occupation and avocation - whatever happens, we must believe and know, must be good for you.

And, of course, as you go on with your life you realise that He is pulling all the strings. Events that seem impossibly terrible at the moment - disasters - at the moment, somehow or another twist themselves around - or you get twisted around, that's probably the case - so that later on, well, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Another saying, and you can who knew him, can hear that, hear him saying that, "Feel for others..."

Prema, you must learn to feel for others." Hum? Now, what does that mean? That's a very difficult thing to do. Because we are always acting and reacting in terms of our own point of view. And if the other doesn't seem to fall in with that point of view, or seems to be in opposition to it, or seems to be ignorant of it, we immediately consider that person at fault. Feel for others means somehow or other trying to think through his brain, see through his eyes. Of course that doesn't come quickly or easily and it seems to me that as we go on suffering in our own lives and realise how often we are wrong, we begin at last to see how other people feel about certain things, and sympathy which is love - or love which is sympathy - somehow begins to stir a bit in us.

Now I'm going to give you a very astonishing saying. It is extremely cryptic. And I won't even try and interpret it. It happened - I heard it - on an occasion when Swami asked me to go with him to the High Sierras as his cook - which was a very foolish thing for him to have done (all laugh). But, of course, a great privilege for me. And as you know - rice does not boil at the same temperature, or water doesn't boil at the same temperature in the High Sierras as it does at this level. So, the main ingredient of his diet was somewhat doubtful in terms of its being properly boiled. And after one day or two days of suffering in silence Swami said to me in great irritation, "If a person doesn't know how to cook rice he doesn't know how to do anything!" (long laughter)

Another curious thing I heard Swami say more than once, "I've never suffered in my life." Now, of course we know that he suffered, but he did say that. This was because I wrote in my very freshman days here an article called "Suffering" and his response later on - not at the moment (he was very encouraging in the early days about things like that) - but later he did say "I've never suffered a moment in my life".

Now how can we interpret that?

Well, we can interpret it, of course, according to a high level, because basically if one is ... has his feet planted firmly on his faith, and one has taken refuge in his faith, then he does not suffer in the same sense as people who are simply torn by the slings and arrows of everyday life.

But as I've reflected on that, it can come to us also if we make our life, if somehow we get our life organised. We suffer because we have incompatible desires. We are torn by all sorts of alternating currents.

So I come to the concept of sacrifice. I think that until we somehow or other make up our minds that we are a living sacrifice, we will suffer. But when we come to the point, if we are so lucky, that we can say, "All right, I'm not holding anything back and I am not trying to preserve a particular situation or position or privilege, or expect the appreciation and even the approval of others - then our life reaches a point where there isn't very much conflict in it, in so far as human relations are concerned and incompatible desires.

And then a certain kind of happiness, a kind of low-key happiness, not the kind we were looking for

before, but a kind of low-key happiness begins to take over.

The existentialist says, "I am responsible for everything in this universe." Well, we say, "I am not responsible for anything in this universe. I am simply here to serve."

I often tell our boys in Gretz, who don't want to do this or don't want to do that, or refuse to do this or hesitate about doing that, "As long as you're holding yourself back, you won't be happy." Just make yourself a sacrifice. Sooner or later you will have to.

And then, as you can say with our Swami Prabhavananda, "I've never suffered a moment in my life."

I'd like to quote a saying of Mahatma Gandhi. He says (reading recently his visit to Romain Rolland in Switzerland in 1931) - and he and Romain Rolland had a wonderful conversation (all of which is recorded in Romain Rolland's Journals) and Gandhi said, "Truth brings joy." He said, "First of all I felt that Truth was God, then I came to see that God is Truth. And Truth brings joy. If it doesn't it isn't Truth." If it doesn't bring joy it isn't Truth.

The next saying I wish to bring back to your attention is one everyone knows perfectly well, "Meditate, meditate, meditate." And I would add that that certainly includes doing japam.* I'm a great believer in japam. It was forced upon me and - but I must say it was effective.

You can easily test what meditation does for you. Let us say that - now I'm not talking about it to bring you into a state of ecstasy and Nirvana. I'm talking about the daily practice of regularly going and sitting.

Suppose you go on vacation. Your whole routine is upset. So, in the morning, of course, instead of going to your room where you meditate or to the chapel, well, you decide to take a swim. And in the evening, instead of thinking that six o'clock is the time to be quiet for an hour, well, this is a good time to go down to the restaurant or, whatever it is, horseback riding, or go for a walk. You find after a few days - this has happened to me so I know - that a certain finesse, a certain edge to your recollection, becomes a bit blunted. And you think, "Well, I think I will be glad to get back to my regular practices again."

Because distractions don't distract. That is a conclusion that one comes to, distractions don't distract.

Then I remember him saying - very often to me, perhaps oftener to me than to some - "Always be positive." This is a very simple saying, yet how easy it is not to be positive. How easy it is to be negative and I think particularly when we criticise mentally or verbally others, we are going against this suggestion to always be positive.

Silence is better if one can possibly keep silent.

I get a great inspiration from - on this particular subject - from Swami Ritajananda who is very positive.

We have - I give you one example. There is in France a very well-known popular singer who is easily compared in France to big name singers here. He's made many records, popular records. And like some others, his success was too much, and he went through a nervous breakdown, divorce, drugs and the whole thing. He has no interest whatsoever in religion, but somewhere or other he heard that there was a holy man - not a holy man, a seer in Gretz, and so he began to come. Simultaneously going to a psychiatrist.

Swami had received him everytime, anytime, night or day, anytime he wants to come and it's always the same - a desperate story of depression and lack of self-confidence, failure in the midst of success ... And I always say, "Well, Swami, haven't you had enough of this now. There doesn't seem to be any improvement." "No, there doesn't seem to be any improvement - but he may change. Always again the same - but he may change. He hasn't yet - but he may change." So that's always being positive.

...to call, but we somehow feel that calling and talking may help them. And here in the middle of the night I would often answer such telephone calls. And I must say that the French at least don't call in the middle of the night (laughter). But they call, and you may be amused by this story which is at least partially true (laughter).

Swami always said, "If someone asks you to pray for them, what do you do?" I asked, "What do you do?" He said, "Tell them that you will pray for them, and mentally put them at the feet of the Lord." And this has always been my practice and still is.

So there was a call from a woman, and she said, "My teenage son is very terrible toward me. He even hits me. And will you please do something?"

So I thought, well, I will do what I had been taught to do and I said, "Please tell me your name, not your family name but your first name, and the name of your son, not the family name, I'm not interested. And I will pray for him." So she told me her name, and she told me his name, Henri (Henry).

"Yes, madame, I shall do it."

"Well, sir, would you also pray for Francois?"

Well now (Swami laughs) it's twice as many. "Yes, if you wish."

"And also Jean-Pierre." (all laugh) It seems there's quite a big family there.

"And Eileen, (laughter), and the twins, Christian et Christienne."

So I did as requested - put them all, this entire group (laughter) at the feet of the Lord.

Then she called back sometime later and she said, "I want to tell you that things are really very much

better." (You see, it gives confidence to the people themselves. That, perhaps, is the psychology of it.)

But she said, "It's Bruno that's causing the trouble now."

I said, "Bruno? But you didn't mention Bruno!" (all laugh)

And she said, "I know, and that's why he's acting so badly." (long laughter)

Well, here's another one. You've all heard this. "Oh, what patience it takes! Oh Prema, what patience it takes!"

Now, I have heard that from him, and since I have been in a position of - to a very slight extent - trying to look after a few boys, young novices at our own centre, this saying has repeated itself in my mind many times: what patience it takes!

You see, evolution is a very slow thing. And we see things from our standpoint in looking at the young who are beginning their sadhana* from a rather different position, and we wonder, "Well, why in the world doesn't he see that immediately?" "Why doesn't she quickly grasp the situation?" Well, it just doesn't happen that way. It takes patience.

But without patience you won't accomplish anything in dealing with such situations. Patience - love - that's the only way I know - and trying to give a good example - that's the only way I know of helping anybody.

Then, I think you will surely remember this one: "Never give up the struggle." And this is often coupled with another saying, "There is no failure in spiritual life."

There is no failure in spiritual life. Now you find that clearly set forth as well in the Bhagavad Gita. "Even if you seem to fail or stop, what has been gained will not be lost. It is emmagasine - put in a kind of deposit from which you can draw the next time round. Someone was saying to me today, "Isn't it remarkable that when I first came into this life I had this idea of doing such and such?" Those things we arrive with are things that we have learned and which we get the fruit of the next time round.

But that, of course, is a rather lazy way of looking at things. I prefer the other saying, "Don't give up the struggle." Never give up the struggle.

And this was very clearly brought to our attention here once by a dream that one of the members had, who was in a very discouraged condition and somehow or other, the cry of the heart was answered by a dream. And in the dream this disciple was on a train. And the train stopped as they often do. And so the disciple was going to get down, and the train go on, of course... and then a voice was heard saying, "Don't get off the train." And this solved the problem.

Well, we all know, we know this, but just keep putting it in mind is a good thing. As long as you stay on the train you will keep moving, but if you get down, then it's a different thing.

Never give up the struggle.

Another saying, which I'd put among the cryptic sayings - he said to me, "Never sit on the threshold of a door."

You see, we have here a wooden threshold between the outer and the inner shrine. And because then, as now, I liked a little support under me, I took, when meditating, to sitting on that slightly elevated wooden threshold. Which, from my background, was not an extraordinary thing to do.

And after one or two occasions, I think it was Swami Krishnananda who was sent to me to tell me that we do not sit on the threshold, and it was explained that the gods of the door, the protectors of the porte are there - and they don't like it. (Laughter) Which, of course (laughing himself) to my western way of thinking, made perfect sense!

But the truth of the matter is far deeper and subtler than that. It consists of making a commitment: either be in or be out. Don't be half-way between. It shows a certain lack of decision. A certain "foot in two camps" psychology. And whether there are gods protecting the lintel or not, I don't know. But I can understand perfectly that if you are going to be in the shrine, be in the shrine. If you are going to be in the outer shrine, be in the outer shrine. But don't try to be in the two at the same time.

And so, that, of course, is an easy thing to apply to our life. Make clear, strong decisions. And, no shilly-shallying, wishy-washy business. Commitment.

The next teaching that I wish to bring - recall to your mind: "Never lower the Ideal."

This is something that is very important for religious organisations to keep in mind. And individuals. Because that sharp enthusiasm naturally becomes somewhat blunted with the passage of time, and we may begin to make compromises. But we must keep in mind that, even if we don't achieve our Ideal at once, we must always remember that the Ideal is an Ideal and should not be tampered with.

One may admit clearly, and openly, "No, I have not been able to achieve the Ideal." But one should never attempt to justify one's performance in terms of lowering the Ideal - for success reasons, or for reasons of comfort, or for any other sort of reason.

We have seen so many religious movements - so-called religious movements - in the West which seem to make everything very easy. And which have achieved, it seems, a great success... But that is not our way. Even if Vedanta remains small - and it still does remain small, at least in the West, in the Occident - I think we must be faithful to our Master and Mother who lived the highest realisation, the highest virtue as our Ideal, the highest knowledge as our Ideal, the highest devotion. And not bring that down to

make things go a bit better. So far, I think, we are keeping up the standard.

Then I would remind you of what Swami always said: "Our objective is transformation of personality. Sometimes he said, "Our objective is samadhi, and nothing less." That certainly is keeping the Ideal high.

He said sometimes, "My only hope for my children is that they should become men and women of God."

Well ... that is really what we are really struggling for, to become men and women of God.

I like the American enthusiasm for transformation of personality. There are any number of books and programmes devoted to that. But transformation of personality in terms of it becoming transformed into a spiritual personality - not simply a personality that is very interesting or who attracts other people or produces success - but a spiritual personality.

I would like, before finishing, to say something about another teaching that I have learned - this time from Swami Ritajananda, who has been for me a very interesting experience after some 15 or 18 years with Swami Prabhavananda - I have now had the blessing of being with Swami Ritajananda for an equal number of years, more or less, of course.

And this is something that I find a very practical teaching, and which complements all these others that I have already brought to your attention.

Swami uses silence as a response, and it is a most effective response.

You may remember that there was a very interesting event that happened here many years ago which caused the newspaper men and reporters of all the wire-services and the local papers to invade this place for a few hours, for a day or so, trying to get the information, because of the somewhat international interest in the subject.

When they all arrived in their most furocious manner, and began asking questions to write their stories, I simply didn't know how to handle it. Because we were trying to play the story as calmly and as simply as possible - subtly as possible. And I frantically called a friend of mine, a friend of the Centre, who had worked on newspapers, "What in the world am I going to - how am I to handle this impact of reporters?" And he said, "There are two things you can do. One is call a press conference and give out a story to them all at the same time. And another thing you can do is simply to say, `No comment'." (laughter)

Actually, we finally did the former. But how often since then I have thought, "What a nice response! `No comment'."

You see, when somebody comes and makes a pointed remark, immediately we fly to our defence, for self-justification, explaining, maybe hurting another person in order to explain.

There's one particular person at Gretz who likes to ...and at first I used to react in justification, but, over the years I simply have learned to smile and say nothing. And after all the wad had been shot (laughter) the person turns around and marches out of the room, and it's all over.

But to have responded ... Silence as a response. I would really like to recommend that as a working basis for everyday life.

Well, we have just about used our hour. I thought, in case I ran out of material - I would have to do as Swami used to tell what he had to do when he ran out of material.

Along about twenty minutes before the hour was finished he had a tendency to finish the sermon and didn't know exactly in his mind, of course, what to do for the rest of the time. And he would always explain like this: "I came to the end of my notes and I didn't know what to say next to fill the hour and I prayed to Mother, `Oh Mother, give me material!' and she did!" (laughter)

And, you see, I talked a whole hour.

Well, I guess that is how I have managed to arrive at nine o'clock.

Shall we just close with a prayer of Ramakrishna:

"Oh Mother, I don't want name and fame;
I don't want the eight occult powers;
Oh Mother,
I have no desire for creature comforts;
Please, Mother,
grant me the boon that I may have pure love
for Thy lotus feet."

[Return to Table of Contents.](#)