

Stories of Vedanta **Monks**

Volume 1

Swami Chetanananda



Advaita Ashrama

(Publication House of Ramakrishna Math)
5 Dehi Entally Road • Kolkata 700 014

Contents

Section 1

Some Presidents of the Ramakrishna Order

1. Swami Shankarananda17
2. Swami Madhavananda27
3. Swami Vireshwarananda36
4. Swami Gambhirananda.....42
5. Swami Bhuteshananda61
6. Swami Gahanananda.....92

Section 2

Some Prominent Monks of the Ramakrishna Order

7. Swami Shantananda99
8. Swami Abhayananda.....101
9. Swami Nirvanananda106
10. Swami Omkarananda110
11. Swami Shashwatananda117
12. Swami Ishanananda.....120
13. Swami Haripremananda.....124
14. Swami Maheshwarananda126
15. Swami Saradeshananda127
16. Swami Bodhatmananda135
17. Swami Sarvajnananda.....149
18. Reminiscences of Various Monks156

Section 3

Some Monks of Varanasi Centres

19. Varanasi and Swami Achalananda165
20. Swami Bhaswarananda.....169

21. Swami Apurvananda	176
22. Swami Swaprakashananda	180
23. Swami Parameshananda	186
24. Swami Satyaswarupananda	188
25. Swami Chitprakashananda	196
26. Swami Raghuvananda	198
27. Swami Dharmeshananda	200
28. Swami Dhireshananda	209
29. Swami Muktananda	230

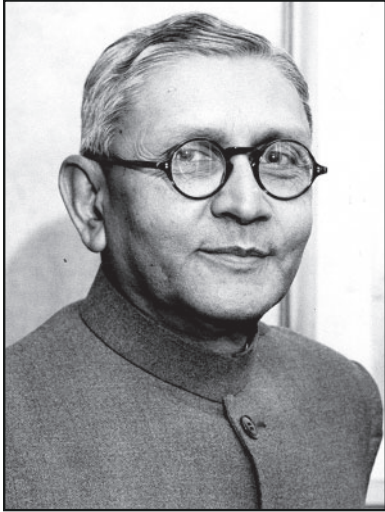
Section 4

Some Monks of Western Centres

30. Swami Prabhavananda	233
31. Swami Satprakashananda	255
32. Swami Nikhilananda	269
33. Swami Pavitrananda	280
34. Swami Bodhananda	284
35. Swami Vividishananda	295
36. Swami Areshananda	297
37. Swami Shradhdhananda	324
38. Swami Sarvagatananda	333
39. Swami Akhilananda	342
40. Swami Ashokananda	345
41. Swami Shantaswarupananda	352
42. Swami Vijayananda	356
Index	364

Swami Madhavananda

(1888–1965)



Part 1

It is not easy to write about someone who always tried to avoid the public gaze. That is, however, the sign of a true spiritual seeker. Monks and mystics like to remain unnoticed in this world lest their communion with God be interrupted. Yet their lives teach us about the Divine more than a library of religious and philosophical literature can ever do. They teach through a few words or even through silence—they do not wish to engage in vain religious discourses. A few words uttered by such people can change the course of one's life.

I first came in contact with the Ramakrishna Order in 1950, and from the very beginning, I used to visit Belur Math, Dakshineswar temple, and Udbodhan House regularly. Finally, in December 1958 I joined Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. From then on I had many opportunities to see and talk to Swami Madhavananda, who was the general secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission when I joined. Some of my conversations with him are rather personal, but I wish to share with you a few incidents from my memory and my diaries.

In 1959, Advaita Ashrama was located at 4 Wellington Lane in Calcutta. One day Swami Madhavananda went to Dr. Nihar Munshi for an eye examination, accompanied by another senior monk. On the way back to Belur Math, they stopped at Advaita Ashrama. It was summer. We quickly brought some green coconuts and sweets for their refreshment. Unfortunately, the coconuts had very thick flesh, which meant that the water inside was tasteless and pungent. Swami Madhavananda drank

the coconut water without a word but his companion gave it back after tasting it. Embarrassed, we offered to get a different batch of coconuts—perhaps of better quality—for them. Swami Madhavananda stopped us, and said: “Fussing over things is not desirable for a monk.” He practised the Gita’s teaching in his own life: “Be content with what comes to you of its own accord.”

In 1961, before relinquishing his duties as general secretary, Swami Madhavananda went to Kalimpong for a rest. His secretary from Belur Math asked me to send a few pills for him to Kalimpong via regular mail. The swami was extremely conscientious about spending money and never wanted to spend any more than absolutely necessary. He was also reluctant to accept any special diet or any other special arrangement for himself. Knowing all this, in order to mail his medicines, I first wrote the address on the envelope, then put the capsules in a plastic pouch and placed it in such a way that it would not shift during transit, and also, the pills would not get crushed when the envelope was stamped at the post office. Then I wrote a letter and inserted it in the envelope. Later on, after his return, I went to see him at the monastery. He said: “You are very clever. After taking out your letter, I had thrown away the envelope in the wastepaper basket. Then from your letter, I realized what was in it! I rescued the envelope and the pills were intact. Thank you for sending them in the most economical way.”

When I joined Advaita Ashrama, Swami Gambhirananda was in charge. Our publication division was closed on Sundays, and sometimes we would go and spend the day at Belur Math. Occasionally, Swami Madhavananda would send letters concerning business or personal matters to Swami Gambhirananda through us. He would put his letter in a used envelope, seal it, and ask us to give it to Swami Gambhirananda. He considered each penny of the Ramakrishna Order to have been earned by Swami Vivekananda with his heart’s blood. He was very austere himself, and strongly opposed waste or extravagance in the monastery.

Swami Madhavananda went to America for brain surgery in 1961. Before he left, he inaugurated the new Advaita Ashrama building at 5 Dehi Entally Road, Calcutta. I clearly remember that after the formal inauguration, he folded his hands and prayed to the Master. Later, at breakfast, a monk commented lightheartedly: “Maharaj, you have violated the rule of Advaita Ashrama. According to Swamiji’s instruction, one cannot pay obeisance to a deity or perform a ritual here.” Swami Madhavananda replied: “It is a force of habit. What can I do?” His life was a wonderful harmony of knowledge and devotion. Externally, he was very rational

and strict, but he was also full of love and devotion within.

The inauguration ceremony was attended by almost two hundred monks. A caterer was assigned to arrange breakfast for everybody. I was asked to serve Swami Madhavananda and a few other senior monks. I had called the swami's personal attendant beforehand to find out what he routinely had for breakfast. Accordingly, we purchased Britannia cream crackers, sandesh, and other items. When the food was served, Swami Madhavananda exclaimed: "Dear God! Wherever I go, I have to eat the same thing. What's the matter? These boys won't even let me have a change of taste." Perhaps it is hard for a free soul to be bound by rules, but we were concerned about his health. Anyway, we served him other items as well, and he ate joyfully.

When I joined Advaita Ashrama, I was assigned the job of proofreading. Whenever I had any questions, I would ask Swami Gambhirananda. One day he said to me: "I am going to Mayavati. If you have any doubts or questions regarding *The Complete Works [of Swami Vivekananda]*, just ask Swami Madhavananda." The swami was an authority on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature.

During Swamiji's birth centenary, we found an unpublished letter from Swamiji to Manmathanath Bhattacharya that was written in Bengali. Swami Gambhirananda translated it into English and sent it to Swami Madhavananda for his approval. Swami Madhavananda read the translation carefully and sent it back to Advaita Ashrama for inclusion in the *Complete Works*. People cannot imagine the tremendous zeal and dedication with which these monks quietly worked for Swamiji.

In 1963, I was supposed to go to the Probationers' Training Centre at Belur Math, but Swami Gambhirananda said that this had to be postponed due to Swamiji's birth centenary celebrations. We were then heavily occupied with the publication of the 100th birth anniversary edition of the *Complete Works* and a collection of seventy-five of Vivekananda's photographs. We were also arranging for a special book fair at Park Circus. At any rate, I told Swami Madhavananda at Belur Math that Swami Gambhirananda had asked me to postpone coming to the Training Centre and instead do Swamiji's work that year. Swami Madhavananda immediately said: "Gambhirananda is right. Do Swamiji's work. If your brahmacharya ordination is delayed by a year, do not think that you will become a junior. The ordinations are formalities. The main thing is God-realization. Do you know who is really senior, and who is junior? He who is closer to the Master is senior. One does not necessarily become senior just because he has been in the Order longer."

After being elected president of the Order, Swami Madhavananda started giving initiation. We had procured an old photograph of the swami taken in Rangoon and this was being made available to his disciples. I used to talk to him quite freely, so one day I proposed bringing a photographer from Calcutta. Initially, he did not agree to this, but when his chief attendant also suggested the same, he grudgingly consented. He abhorred publicity and self-aggrandizement. Anyway, one afternoon, I went to Belur Math with a professional photographer. I still remember how disinterestedly the swami changed from a short-sleeved shirt to a long-sleeved ochre shirt and a shawl, and sat on a carpet on the veranda in front of his room. Unfortunately, the photographs did not turn out well because he had very thick eyeglasses that created a lot of glare.

Later I brought another photographer, and this time we used eyeglasses without lenses. Swami Madhavananda sat cross-legged on a carpet. When I asked him to sit in a way that would show both of his feet, he rebuked me mildly but nevertheless did as I requested. I gently adjusted his shawl so that devotees could touch his holy feet in the photograph. Then I asked him to wear the eyeglass frame without the lenses. "It will be unnatural," he commented. However, with his regular glasses, his eyes would not be visible at all. Finally, with much displeasure, he put on the empty frame and the photographer took the shot. Copies of those photographs and negatives may still be at Advaita Ashrama.

Since joining the Order, I have heard many wonderful stories about Swami Madhavananda from other monastic members. He was a very private person. Above all, giving unsolicited advice was very much against his nature. If someone asked him a question, he would respond with a few words. "Brevity is the soul of wit," as the saying goes. We used to be eager to hear anything from him.

In 1962, Swami Madhavananda spoke a few words before the newly ordained brahmacharis. A fellow brahmachari had noted them down and I copied them into my diary. I mention them here briefly:

1. "One should try to serve the Order to the best of one's ability. Always try to contribute your part."
2. "In the case of a conflict between the interest of the Order and one's own, one should forgo his own interest. This will result in the welfare of both the Order and the individual. You may not be able to completely annihilate your ego, but this will take you far."
3. "There should be a bond of love among members of the Order. Swamiji has handed this attitude down to us and it must be followed. We

have to look at each other's good qualities and overlook the faults. For the welfare of all, always take a positive attitude instead of negative. Always try to look at the cup as half full rather than half empty."

4. "All tasks are equally important. Make no distinction such as 'high' and 'low' about responsibilities. The big and small—both hands of the clock are equally important. Likewise, every part of this Order is equally essential."
5. "Comforts do not make men great. It is their lives that make them so. It is better not to think too much about physical comfort. Comforts that are readily available may be accepted, but there should not be any discontentment if they are not available. In the early days of our Order, items of physical comfort were almost nonexistent compared to what we have today. Our ideal is plain living and high thinking."
6. "Swamiji said that work is worship. We do not hear much of this nowadays. While performing a task, you should think that you are serving the Master. If you carry out your duties properly, your spiritual practices also will proceed smoothly."
7. "Japa and meditation, work, scriptural study, physical exercise—try to practise all these simultaneously. A synthetic approach is always good, and develops the character."
8. "Uterior motives, petty desires, thirst for power, hankering after name and fame—all these have no place in our lives. God-realization is our main idea and ideal. So, pray to the Master with all earnestness. But it must be a sincere, earnest prayer. We realize Him through His grace. At the very end, He will bestow His grace. This is the truth."
9. "Our purpose is not to do something extraordinary or shine wonderfully. If you serve the Order in a responsible manner, according to your capacity, that will be sufficient. Therein lies the justification for our renouncing everything and taking to sannyasa, and that will bring welfare to the society."
10. "In other religious Orders, there may be a few great men, but we have the Master, God Himself, as the centre of our Order. We are blessed indeed. By His grace, He has brought us into His fold. Otherwise, a life of renunciation is not easy; rather it is extremely difficult to achieve."
11. "The ideal cannot be realized easily and within a short period of time. One has to practise steadily, sincerely, and earnestly for a long time. Only then fulfillment comes."

Whenever I come across any writing by or on Swami Madhavananda, I read it with great interest. In 1956, the swami went to America for the

dedication of the Vedanta temple in Santa Barbara. On that occasion, on 12 February he gave a talk at the Hollywood temple, which was later published in *Vedanta and the West* in January 1959 (No. 135) under the title “Vivekananda and His Message.” I translated it into Bengali and it was published in *Udbodhan*.

In 1975, when I was in Hollywood, I found an article in *Udbodhan* on Swami Madhavananda that had been written by Swami Niramayananda. It helped me to understand the deep meaning of karma yoga, or the yoga of action. I wasted no time in translating it into English, and this was published in *Prabuddha Bharata* under the title “Work or Worship” in November 1975.

In 1964, when I was at the Belur Math Training Centre, I had an interview with Swami Madhavananda. At that time he discussed many details of practical spiritual life, such as how to control the restlessness of the mind, how to turn the mind inward, and so on.

One day, while meditating on his bed under a mosquito net, he suffered a serious injury. He had tried to bow down at the end of meditation and—oblivious as he was to his position and his surroundings—he fell to the floor and broke his femur bone. After he was released from the hospital, I asked: “How are you, Maharaj?”

Swami Madhavananda: “I am all right.”

I: “Do you still have pain?”

He did not like to be reminded of his body, so he said to me: “Are you well?”

I: “Yes, Maharaj.”

Swami Madhavananda: “No, you are not completely well. If a physician were to examine you now, he would certainly find some irregularity somewhere. A perfectly healthy body is a contradiction in terms.”

I learned a lesson indeed.

The respectful way that Swami Madhavananda treated the novices was quite remarkable. He laid great stress on human dignity. He was even reluctant to ring a bell to call his attendants during an illness. After he had his fall, someone had to be with him twenty-four hours a day. At the same time, his regular attendants needed some rest too. So brahmacharis from the Training Centre were assigned to his room during the night in two shifts. On the first night, from 11:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m., it was my turn to be at his service. It was a rare privilege to serve a monk like him. I sat in a corner of his room and read the *Gospel* under a small table lamp while keeping an eye on him.

In the afternoon, Swami Madhavananda used to sit outside his room

on a canvas recliner with his feet elevated on a wicker stool. One day I happened to go there while he was talking to Swami Gangeshananda, who was very affectionate to me. Thinking that Swami Madhavananda might not know me, Swami Gangeshananda was about to introduce me to him when Swami Madhavananda said, "I know him indeed. He is always smiling." I took this comment as a blessing from him.

I remember the day when Swami Madhavananda left his body. It was Wednesday, 6 October 1965, at 6:50 p.m. After my evening meditation near Swamiji's temple, I saw some monastery workers opening the gate of the cremation area. Curious, I got up and found out what happened. The next day, we all chanted Vedic hymns during his last rites. A great monk of the Ramakrishna Order had passed away, leaving behind an ideal life for all to emulate.

Going back to where I started: It is extremely difficult to write about Swami Madhavananda. He did not discuss religion. Rather, he practised it and manifested it in his own life. His life was his message. His premonastic name was Nirmal, which means "free from any impurity." His life justified this name.

Part 2

I have heard the following reminiscences of Swami Madhavananda from other senior monks.

One young man used to read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* every day. One day, he went to Belur Math, where he met with Swami Madhavananda's secretary, Swami Pramathananda, and expressed his desire to join the Order. Hearing everything, Swami Madhavananda said to his secretary: "Ask him to read the books by Swami Vivekananda. One cannot become a monk by reading the *Gospel*. The *Gospel* makes one see God. Where is the need to become a monk then? Swamiji's words will give him the inspiration, and then he will feel the need to renounce the world and embrace monastic life."

Once a brahmachari said to Swami Madhavananda: "Maharaj, I have no peace of mind. Please tell me what I should do." Swami Madhavananda replied: "I am sorry that you have no peace. So many wealthy householders from the city come here with their families and fancy cars. They bow down before the Master; they also bow down to you to get some peace. On the other hand, you are saying that you have no peace yourself. Tell me, what can I do?"

That incident reminds me that Swami Vasudevananda had once asked

Swami Turiyananda: “What is the way to peace?” His answer was: “Repeat and contemplate on ‘*vairagyameva abhayam* — renunciation alone makes one fearless.’ That will give you peace. Do not run after any desired object. If some fine thing comes, all right; if it goes away, say ‘*vairagyameva abhayam* — Dispassion alone makes one fearless.’”

Swami Madhavananda once told his assistant that he was not qualified to be the general secretary and that he should resign. When he was asked the reason, he replied: “Recently I interviewed separately two monks of a centre. I listened to their accounts of a certain situation, and they were totally contradictory. Now I do not know who is telling the truth. I do not have any power like the Master who could see the interior of a person like one’s face in a mirror. I should, therefore, resign.” He always followed the truth wholeheartedly.

Swami Gambhirananda once said to me: “Regarding the direction of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, everybody accepted the decisions of Swami Madhavananda. His was the last word. Because of his purity and holiness, detachment and dispassion, unselfishness and impartial judgment, keen intellect and learning, love and loyalty towards the Order, and devotion to the Master and Mother, everybody held him in extremely high regard. He guided the Order on the basis of spirituality, morality, and ethics. He had infinite love, compassion, and forgiveness towards all monastics.”

Swami Hiranmayananda said: “If Swami Madhavananda chastised someone for an offense, he accepted it with humility because he knew that it was coming from a genuine monk who had no hatred or malice in his heart.”

Manu Maharaj [Swami Achintyananda] was of a somewhat rough temperament. He used to stay at the monks’ quarters but did not get along well with the other residents. One day Swami Madhavananda called him and said: “Manu, there are complaints against you.” Manu Maharaj retorted: “There are complaints against you as well.” At this Swami Madhavananda said: “Kalikrishna Maharaj [Swami Virajananda, then president of the Order] will deal with the complaints against me, and I shall have to deal with the complaints against you.” Swami Madhavananda was then the general secretary, the executive head of the Order.

In those days the monastery library was housed on the upper floor of the old Mission Office building. The librarian, Chandra Maharaj, had an intestinal ulcer and was allotted a small quantity of milk. But a proper diet was not always available for the resident monks due to financial difficulties. The manager swami once discontinued his milk, and Chandra

Maharaj went to the library belching loudly. Swami Madhavananda's office was nearby. When he heard the belching, he inquired about it. Then he asked the manager to serve Chandra Maharaj the milk that had been allotted for himself. As a result, Chandra Maharaj again received his milk, and Swami Madhavananda was served milk as well.

Swami Madhavananda was a devoted follower of the almanac and always consulted it before going anywhere. Once while coming down the hills from Mayavati on horseback, he fell from his horse. His companions rescued him from the bushes on the roadside. One of the monks said to him: "You consulted the almanac before the trip, yet you got into this accident!" The swami replied: "I could have rolled down the steep hill and died. Instead I ended up with minor nicks and cuts."

Next to the direct disciples of the Master, Swami Madhavananda was considered an ideal monk in the Order. He was truly a role model. The various traits of a genuinely holy man described in the *Gospel* were all manifest in him. In spite of all this, he was completely egoless. In 1961 he had to go to America for surgery for a brain tumor. Swami Nikhilananda bore all the expenses. Swami Madhavananda went to board the plane in Western clothes. People at the Calcutta airport were intrigued to see so many ochre-clad monks bowing down before a gentleman in Western attire.

In 1964, when I was at the Training Centre in Belur Math, one of my fellow trainees, Madhavan, was studying philosophy with great zeal. He could recite many scriptural passages from memory. One day, he went to Swami Madhavananda, then president of the Order, and started asking various philosophical questions. The swami said: "Look, I am now a student of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. You may go to your teachers at the Training Centre, and ask those questions." He was roaming above the intellectual realm in those days. He also might have sensed that the novice was more interested in showing off his learning than in learning itself.

This reticent, self-effacing monk left the world more than half a century ago, yet his ideal life is still inspiring us and teaching us how to be ideal monks.