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Some articles use the masculine pronoun when referring to God, in keeping with convention and to avoid the clumsiness of constructions such as 'He or She' or 'Him or Her.'

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Letters and Submissions: matruvani@amritapuri.org



Ego, the Evilest Enemy

Children, our most evil enemy is the ego. It makes us inhuman. Most people believe that achievements are built upon the foundation of the ego. Perhaps people in the working world might feel that the ego cannot be effaced totally. That said, we should see to it that we keep the ego under control. No matter where one works, one must learn to handle the egoistic 'I' sense with maturity. If not, it will harm both the individual and society.

Consider a family. If its head cannot defer to the other family members or respect the opinions of his wife and children, will there be any peace and happiness at home? No, there will only be conflict, contention and a lack of consensus in that tiny world of three or four people.

Whether in business, politics or any other field, the biggest problem is hostile competition among those working in that field. The root cause of

this problem is the unchecked ego. Such antagonism is common among members of the same party, between rival parties, and among business associates. An individual or a few people engage in a tug of war to gain dominion over the others. In such situations, we can see some people mercilessly tormenting their opponents tactically, psychologically or even physically in a bid to flaunt how powerful they are. They will stoop to any means to prove this. They become insensible to the pains and sorrows of others. When we can see and think only through the tiny perspective of 'me and mine,' we lose our ability to forbear, forgive and sympathize. Once we become fixated on getting something at any cost, we will have no qualms in hurting others for personal gain.

Amma remembers a story. A man visited his lawyer to discuss matters pertaining to a case. He had misgivings

about how it was unfolding. He told his lawyer, "I don't think I will win this case. You must find some way to win it." After a pause, he said, "I understand that the judge presiding over my case is crazy about cricket. I was thinking, what if we bought him a business-class ticket to watch the India-Australia match in Australia?"

When he heard this, the lawyer said "The judge prides himself on his honesty and impartiality. He can never be bribed. If we tried something like that, he will be furious and turn against you in indignation. You can imagine how the case will end."

The judge ruled in favour of the man. To celebrate the victory, he took his lawyer out for a meal. The lawyer said, "How do you feel now? What if you had sent him a free ticket to watch the cricket match in Australia? Can you imagine what the verdict would have been?"


The man said, “Oh, I was just about to tell you about it. I am immensely grateful for your valuable advice. In fact, I did send the judge a free ticket, but I sent it in my adversary’s name!”

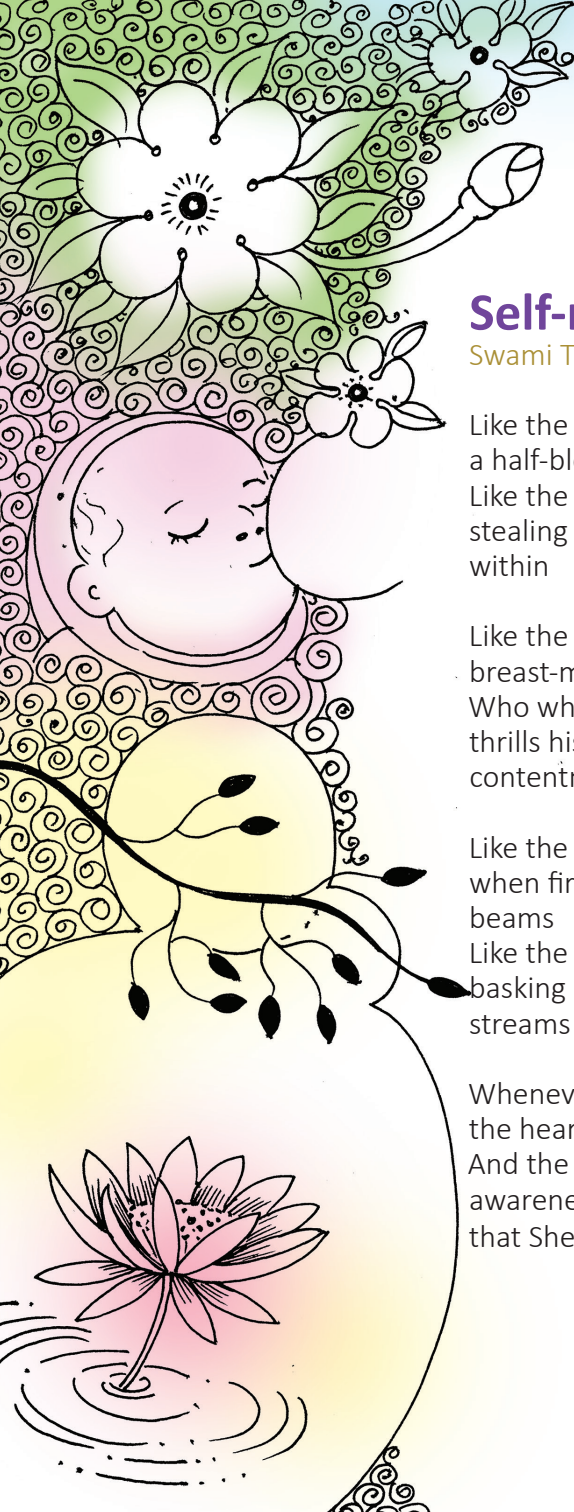
Children, such vile acts push us deeper into the dark trenches of the ego. It harms both us and society. Above all, we sacrifice our own integrity.

The ego is like a jail. One who has no control over the ego can never enjoy the joy and peace of freedom. Such a person might have material wealth and prosperity but will have no peace of mind or contentment, for he will be thinking only of himself and what he can get. The mind of such a person is like a prison cell. True freedom is liberation from the ego. Only spirituality can give us this freedom.

Contemplating spiritual principles is not opposed to the gaining of material prosperity. One who is truly walk-

ing the spiritual path will unfailingly discharge his duty towards society and other people even while striving for material gains. More than just thoughts of ‘me and mine,’ such people will seek to understand the pains and sorrows of others and strive to express love and compassion towards them. They will take upon themselves the responsibility of helping those in distress. Such people will not be enslaved by the ego. They will try sincerely to overcome the ego’s limitations.

Children, the ego is actually a burden. Once we realize this, it won’t be difficult to put it down. Most people cannot see or understand that they have an ego. We hear people say “What an ego he has!” Instead, if we truly realize, “What an ego I have!” the ego will cease to be. Thereafter, we will experience true freedom. 




Self-rapture

Swami Tureeyamritananda Puri

Like the first whiff of
a half-blossomed jasmine
Like the first strains of the flute
stealing into the ears and spreading
within

Like the first taste of
breast-milk for a new-born infant
Who when he first utters 'Amma'
thrills his mother with ecstatic
contentment

Like the water lily's rapture
when first caressed by the full moon's
beams
Like the pink lotus in the valley
basking in the sunlight's easterly
streams

Whenever we see Amma
the heart stirs afresh
And the heart brims with the
awareness
that She is in every atom of flesh. 

Free of Religion

by swami amritachitswarupananda puri

God, who created this entire universe and all its creatures, is not the property or monopoly of Christians, Muslims or Hindus. He is free of religion. He is not confined within the four walls of any temple, church or mosque, which together with scriptures and spiritual practices, are only means to realize God.



As Amma frequently points out, the Creator is not different from His creation. God is the spark that enlivens all beings. He is all-embracing love and compassion. God gains nothing from our prayers or offerings. It is we who gain an expansive and compassionate heart by loving and serving others. This is the essence of all religions: love.

Mahatmas (spiritually illumined souls) like Amma help us reach God. Day and night, She exhorts Her children to uphold peace in their heart and in society. She has nothing to gain from this world but, nevertheless, works tirelessly for the welfare of the world. Her selflessness is an expression of love and devotion for God, whom Amma has realized as the Self in all. The Self is of the nature of existence, consciousness and bliss.

The ancient seers imparted spiritual wisdom in the form of aphorisms such as '*Tat tvam asi*' — 'You are That (reality)',

i.e. existence-consciousness-bliss. They taught that our true nature is ever free and pure. But in our ignorance, we consider ourselves limited to a particular name-body-and-mind complex.

Mahatmas are free of such identifications. They are like birds soaring in the skies of pure consciousness. Lovers of Truth, they do not impose on anyone. Instead, they love and serve all; this is the way of compassion.

It has been said that we created God in our own image. We invented myths and stories and created creeds and concepts to bring this image to life. We have thus framed and limited the infinite Divine, who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, in these and other ways. What is worse, we have tried to make others submit to our notions of the Almighty at knifepoint. Human history is replete with countless instances of human beings killing others and

We have framed and limited the infinite Divine, who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. What is worse, we have tried to make others submit to our notions of the Almighty at knifepoint.

exploiting nature in the name of God.

The perpetrators of this violence are less interested in God than in perpetuating their own power and ideologies. Is this forced conversion the path of peace, which God stands for? No, it is just cruel exploitation. Such people compromise the God-given Law of Dharma.

Why use God's name to promote petty ideology? Why imprison Him with chains of caste and creed? Why disrespect God, who is kind and compassionate, forgiving and patiently showing us the way from untruth to Truth?

Gurus like Amma have come to free us from all kinds of bondage, including slavery

to false ideology. Our ignorance should not harm others. We must give everyone the freedom to worship as they please. Amma respects all religions. At the same time, She does not condone the behaviour of those who try to exploit others.

Religious conversion is unnecessary, for all religions teach love and compassion for one's fellow human beings and reverence for nature. Let us cease fighting in God's name. Instead, let us be truthful to the essence of our religion and, most importantly, truthful to our Self.

Om lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu — May all beings everywhere be peaceful and happy. 🌸



EXPERIENCE

Food and Grace

by pavithra
(heidrun novak),
germany

Food has always been my one of my favourite pleasures in life. I love shopping for groceries. I have a full fridge at home. I love cooking and baking. And I love my dishwasher after meals!

I love all kinds of food: Italian pizzas

and spaghetti, German bread, Austrian pastry, Spanish tortilla, American pancake and, most of all, any kind of Asian food. I love the intensity of taste, whether very sweet or salty. My grandmother used to eat raw garlic on bread for breakfast. Spices fascinate me. Whenever I cook, I feel I am painting a beautiful picture, not just with colours but with aromas and tastes as well.

My favourite food is chocolate. I love all its varieties: chocolate bars, chocolate chip cookies, pancakes with chocolate cream, chocolate pudding, ice cream with chocolate, cake with chocolate.... And I would have it almost every single day!

One day during the European tour, I spoke to Bri. Dipamrita from Amma's French Ashram. I told her that my mind was restless during meditation and asked her what I could do to become calmer and more centred. As we stood next to the stage where Amma

was giving darshan, she gave me the following advice:

1. Control your thoughts. Don't let them pull you too far away. Practise discernment. Stop every unnecessary thought. Chant your mantra constantly.
2. Work out. Either engage in some kind of exercise like jogging or swimming or work in a garden, digging, for example, until you start perspiring. Whatever you choose to do, pour all your excess energy into it.
3. Control your food. Do not eat any food that stimulates your taste buds too much. Eat food that is neither too sweet nor salty. Reduce spices. Avoid onions and garlic. Be careful with ginger. Eat only fresh food. Drink only water or mild herbal tea. Never eat too much.

The first two pieces of advice made total sense to me and I decided to try earnestly to

follow her advice. But the third point seemed impossible for me. No more sweets? No more onion and garlic? Not even ginger anymore? Drink only water? *No way!* I was ready to admit defeat, willing to concede that I was too weak-willed for such a diet. I ignored this piece of advice and did not think about it anymore.

A few weeks later, I started developing digestive problems. I had belly cramps, diarrhoea and constipation, felt increasingly dizzy at times, and could not sleep well anymore. Towards Christmas, I felt very sick and depleted of energy. As doctors could not find out what the problem was, I consulted a healthcare practitioner, who tested me thoroughly. He found out that I had histamine intolerance. I was very relieved at first because at least I knew what the problem was.

Later, to my utter dismay, I learnt that histamine intoler-

ance is hard to cure and may take years to heal. The worst part was that I would have to follow a strict diet. The smallest slip can cause symptoms to re-emerge and can even lead to anaphylactic shocks. I was, at all costs, to avoid chocolate, ginger, onion, garlic and spices. This meant no pizzas, noodles, pastry items and Asian food. I was to drink mainly clear water; mild herbal teas were permitted. Food had to be prepared fresh.

I could not believe it! I did not *want* to believe it! But my body showed me instant proof. When I ate some chocolate to challenge the diagnosis and prescribed diet, I ended up horribly sick and had diarrhoea for a whole day. Compared with the few minutes of pleasure I had while eating chocolate, feeling sick the rest of the day was just not worth it.

I started on the quest to recover. At first, all I could eat was plain rice with steamed vegetables and olive oil, or

watery porridge with some seeds and a few raisins. This was all I could eat for weeks. After three months, I found that I could eat more foods, but they had to be fresh and plain, without spice.

One day, when I sat for meditation, I realized that my mind had become much calmer recently. I could sit for relatively longer periods of time without too many thoughts disturbing me. When thoughts came, it was much easier for me to let them pass and return to silence.

It was then that I recalled my conversation with Bri. Dipamrita, and it dawned on me that the histamine intolerance had, without my knowing, led me to the diet she had recommended. I was astounded. And as she had predicted, my mind had calmed down significantly.

How much of our conversation did Amma overhear? She must have noticed my resistance to even trying a more controlled diet. So whatever

karma or grace (or both) it was that led to the histamine intolerance, it had the desired effect of making my mind calmer, which is probably what Amma wants, for my own sake.

Proof of how aware Amma is of all that is going on came a year later, during the next European tour.



Having developed severe food intolerances, I knew I had to be well prepared for Amma's Europe Tour, as I would not be able to eat anything from the Indian or Western kitchen. I could not even eat plain rice, kept warm in a container, as I could eat only freshly prepared food.

Sometimes, Amma arrives early at a program venue and distributes a prasad meal to all the volunteers in the hall. When I learnt that this would be taking place in Munich, home ground for me, I broke down

in tears at the thought that I would not be able to eat Amma's prasad. Even though it is a healthy and delicious meal — usually consisting of noodles, veggies and salad — I could not even imagine eating it.

When I learnt later that, as one of the main organizers, I would be invited to help Amma distribute the plates and then sit in front of Her, I broke down a second time. How could I sit right in front of Mother with empty hands while everyone around me was eating? The idea was more than I could bear.

After I calmed down, I decided that I would simply not enter the hall when Amma was distributing prasad. This turned out to be a practical solution. Our new hall consists of two floors. The entrance is on the upper floor, from which one could see Amma sitting in the hall on the lower floor. As I was standing upstairs, I decided to show everyone the

way down to the hall and thus do something useful.

But when Amma saw that I did not come down, She beckoned me to come down and eat. I shook my head and then tried to avoid being seen by Her. But whenever She saw me sending someone down, She would wave at me and clearly indicate that She wanted me to come down and eat. When I still did not go, She sent a girl up with a plate for me.

When the girl came to me with the plate, I explained that I could not eat the meal because of my intolerances. With a friendly and patient smile, she asked me what exactly it was that I could not eat. It was then that I looked down at the plate. When I saw what was on the plate, my heart exploded with joy: French fries!

Of all the foods, there was one thing I could digest easily: potatoes in any form, especially French fries, which are usually not spiced; only oil and salt are added. And as they

cannot be kept warm for long, they are always fresh.

My jaw dropped open and I stuttered, “I can eat the French fries. But what about the rest?”

At this moment, a friend came by with a plate of his own and said, “You can give me the rest.”

I sat down to eat. I could not believe what had just happened. In all these years with Amma, in all those prasad meals before the program starts, I have never ever seen French fries. I asked my friend, who had been tour staff several times, and he also said that he could not remember any prasad meal with French fries.

When I looked at his plate, which he got from the usual line, I was astounded to see that he had only a handful of fries, whereas there were at least two handfuls on my plate!

At that moment, I heard someone calling my name on the microphone. I looked down

and saw Amma waving at me again and, through gestures, inquiring if I was eating. In joy, I held up a French fry, which I then proceeded to put into my mouth and chew. Only then did Amma look satisfied.

Later, when I narrated this incident to some of my organizer friends, one of them said, “When Amma finished darshan in Paris and went to Her camper, She called one of the kitchen staff and told him that She wanted French fries for the prasad meal in Munich. When he told Her that there were no potatoes, Amma said that there were some in the basement freezer. She wanted them prepared and served at night.”

What else is there to say? How can anyone think that Amma is far away? I do not any more. If I ever had any doubt left about Her being the *antaryami*, the innermost dweller, closer to me than the closest, after this experience, I no longer believe that She is always in me; I *know* that this

When Amma finished darshan in Paris, She called one of the kitchen staff and told him that She wanted French fries for the prasad meal in Munich. When he told Her that there were no potatoes, Amma said that there were some in the basement freezer.

is so. Knowing this, what is there to fear? What is there to seek other than the awareness of Her divine presence and making this the topmost priority of one's spiritual life? 🌸

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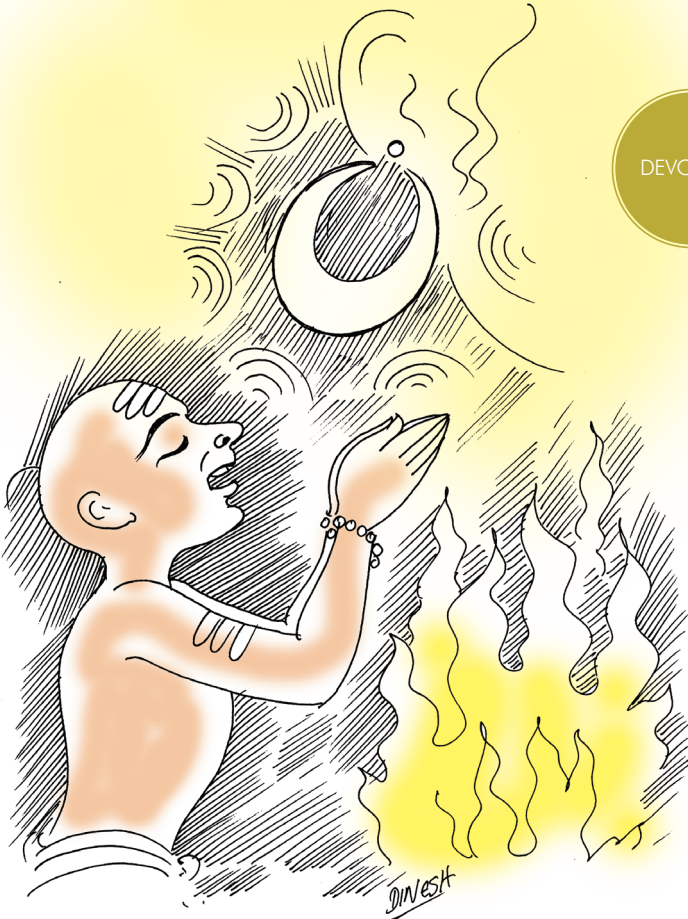
I, Swami Jnanamritananda Puri, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

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DEVOTION



The Pinnacle of Devotion

by sooraj subrahmanyam, india

In India's spiritual tradition, devotion has been the most popular and effective path to Self-

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realization. Many spiritual masters, including Sri Shankaracharya, the revered proponent of the *Advaita* (non-dual) philosophy, were ardent devotees of Devi, the Divine Mother. In his celebrated hymn, *Soundarya Lahari* (Wave of Beauty), he exclaims, “O Mother, who else other than those great souls who have earned profound merit, can extol You and prostrate in front of You, whom even Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma (the Hindu Trinity) worship?”

The Indian legends of ancient and middle periods chronicle how ordinary devotees turned into great spiritual masters and poets by the grace of the Divine Mother. Foremost among them is Kalidasa (literally, Kali’s servant), who is still acclaimed the best Sanskrit poet of all times. Muttas Namboothiri was an ordinary person until he was blessed by Saraswati, Goddess of Knowledge, after which he

became a famous poet and satirist overnight.

Abhirami Pattar stands at the forefront of the many Tamil poet-devotees of the Divine Mother. Born in the 18th century in the Thirukadaiyur village in Tamil Nadu, his parents named him Subramaniya Iyer (Subramani). There was a big temple in that village dedicated to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati known locally as Amritaghateshwarar and Abhirami respectively. From early childhood, Subramani was attracted to Abhirami and spent much of his time in the temple. As days passed, he became more and more absorbed in his devotion, even spending days and nights without food and water. Like Sri Ramakrishna, he would meditate on the Divine Mother at times and at other times crack jokes and laugh with Her. Often, at the peak of devotion, Subramani would shed tears while singing devotional songs.

“Death is inevitable for those who are born, and so, I am not frightened in the least about dying. But in the future, won’t people say that this was the fate of Abhirami’s devotee?” He prayed, “May no one ever denounce the Divine Mother!”

The king heard about Subramani’s devotion and wanted to meet him. A royal messenger went to the temple and asked Subramani to accompany him to the court. Subramani, who was then in a state of divine intoxication, said, “I will come after some time, when the moon rises.”

It was a new moon day. When the king heard what Subramani had said, he became furious. He thought Subramani was mocking him by saying that he would visit the king when the moon rises on a new moon day. He said that if the moon did not rise that night, Subramani would be executed.

A bonfire was lit in the centre of the town, and Subramani was brought there with his hands and legs tied. The king personally came to witness the execution. The news spread and a huge crowd gathered. The sky was pitch dark.


Subramani thought, “Death is inevitable for those who are born, and so, I am not frightened in the least about dying. But in the future, won’t people say that this was the fate of Abhirami’s devotee?” He prayed, “May no one ever denounce the Divine Mother!” Even when faced with imminent death, the devotee’s concern was only about the reputation

of his beloved! This is the pinnacle of devotion.

It was midnight, the time for the execution. Suddenly, Subramani saw Goddess Abhirami in the sky. She took one of her ear-rings and raised it. Its lustre spread as the light of a full moon. Seeing the full moon on a new moon day, the king fell at the feet of the devotee and begged his pardon. All hailed Subramani, and the king bestowed on him the title 'Abhirami Pattar' ('priest of Goddess Abhirami').

A torrent of devotional songs flowed from Abhirami

Pattar and these songs came to be known as '*Abhirami Anthadi*.' 'Anthadi' is a style of poetry in which the last letter of a line becomes the first letter of the next line. *Abhirami Anthadi* is considered as great a work of devotion as the *Soundarya Lahari*. Even today, devotees recite or listen to recitals of *Abhirami Anthadi* and thus enjoy the nectar of devotion.

May the life and works of *mabatmas* like Abhirami Pattar awaken love for God in us and thus enable the full-moon radiance of devotion to fill our hearts. 

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Liberator

by roopesh kaleshan, india

The Sikh religion originated in the 15th century under the leadership of Guru Nanak and against the prevailing socio-politico-spiritual background in the Punjab. Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, added 2,000 lines to the instructions of the earlier Gurus and compiled the holy text, *Guru Granth Sahib*. Within a short period, Sikhism became a threat to the Mughal rulers. Jahangir, the

Mughal emperor, imprisoned Guru Arjan. Apprehensive of the growing anti-Mughal sentiment, the Mughal rulers mercilessly tortured and executed him.

There is a saying, "It is easy to kill individuals but you cannot kill ideas." True to this saying, a powerful man became the sixth Guru. He was Guru Arjan's son, Hargobind Singh. In CE 1606, 11-year-old Hargobind was elevated to the position of the sixth Guru in Sikhism. Later, he became famously known as the *Bandi Chhor*, the Liberator.

Guru Arjan's death at the hands of the Moghuls had shocked the entire Sikh community. From the resulting confusion arose diverse opinions within the community. One faction felt that the Sikh community should withdraw completely from politics and devote all its efforts to spiritual pursuits. Another faction argued that, even as the community strengthened its spir-

itual roots, the community should boldly resist Mughal suppression. These contradictory viewpoints within the Sikh community were nullified in one stroke by the mere appearance of Hargobind. The young lad wore an extremely beautiful turban and a diamond necklace. Two swords flashed on either side of his waist. Addressing the awe-struck onlookers, he said, "These two swords represent the principle of *miri-piri*. The first sword hanging from my waist is *miri*, which denotes temporal power. The second sword, *piri*, denotes spiritual authority."


The clarity of his vision and his extraordinary courage impressed members of the community. Guru Hargobind was the first to evolve the idea of militarization of the Sikhs to counter the Mughal threat.

Guru Hargobind was soon imprisoned in the Gwalior Fort by Jahangir. The Guru was just 14 years old. Accord-

ing to *Dabestan-e Mazabeb*, a Persian compendium of historical events, Guru Hargobind was imprisoned for more than 12 years. Eventually, Jahangir was forced to set him free because of political pressures exerted by the strong and well-organized Sikh community. But Guru Hargobind insisted that he would leave the prison only if the 52 Hindu kings imprisoned with him were also liberated.

As the emperor was not prepared to release all of them, he stipulated a diversionary condition: whoever held on to the Guru's gown as he walked out of the prison would also be set free. Overnight, Guru Hargobind got a beautiful gown that had 52 long silk hems stitched. Each of the Hindu kings held on to one of

these 52 hems and followed the Guru to freedom. It is believed that the day the prisoners was freed was Deepavali. This is also one of the reasons why Sikhs celebrate Deepavali.

India is much more than a geographically defined territory. She is a tapestry woven of cultures that evolved over many periods of time and which took firm shape as a grand civilization. Sikhism is an integral part of this beautiful civilizational fabric. India's composite culture still survives only because of the heroism and sacrifices made by many great men and women, who willingly took up arms and became martyrs to the cause of India. One such soul was Guru Hargobind Singh, the sixth Guru in Sikhism. 

If you're coming to Amritapuri for darshan...

Please note that darshan tokens will be distributed only until 2 p.m. If you wish to go for darshan, please obtain your darshan token before 2 p.m. Thank you.



Chapter 3: Yoga of Action

by Prof. V. Muraleedhara Menon, India

This chapter offers a more detailed and nuanced discussion of the spiritual science mentioned in chapter two. It seeks to understand if action performed without any expectation of reward brings any benefit. It does: the reward is truly glorious.

Whereas an ordinary person, desiring reward, does extensive work and gains a paltry benefit, a karma yogi does little but reaps a huge reward.

The fruit that an action bears is determined not by the magnitude of the action but by the degree of mental purity motivating it. What would the market value of the handful of *aval* (flattened rice paddy) that Kuchela offered Krishna have been? Trifling, but the Lord considered it a priceless and heartfelt offering because every grain in that humble bundle was saturated with that ardent devotee's tender love and rapturous devotion. In other words, what matters is not the outward show but the inner attitude.

Do we appraise a stone idol in a temple by evaluating the quality of stone? No. How can one put a price on a stone that is infused with the vital breath of devotees? To understand the distinction, consider the example of the difference between wages and *dakshina* (honorarium given to the Guru as a token of gratitude).

How heavy is one flower petal? It can weigh as much


the whole universe if offered to the Lord with utmost devotion and faith. Rukmini, Krishna's consort, was able to balance the scales by placing just one *tulasi* (basil) leaf against the pan holding Her Lord. This was because that *tulasi* leaf was imbued with the vibrant devotion and fervid love of the noble Rukmini, who was the very life of Krishna. Would a dry intellectual and an ardent devotee gain the same benefit from taking a dip in the Ganges? The former's body would be cleansed whereas the latter would gain both a clean body and a purified heart.

Therefore, the same action when done by two people with two different attitudes leads to two different outcomes. For the seeker of the Supreme, action is a *sadhana* (spiritual practice) for enlarging his awareness, whereas the same action could become the cause of bondage for a worldly person. The secret of *karma yoga*

(yoga of action) is sense control. A karma yogi's actions foster a harmonious relationship between him and the universe and propitiate the universe. His selfless actions do only good both to him and to society. The actions that one's svadharma enjoins are auspicious for society. Such actions offer yet another benefit: the purity of the mental attitude behind selfless actions makes those actions a form of worship and, therefore, a spiritual practice. They purify the mind of its dross. A karma yogi who has thus been fully transformed becomes a role model for society. If *jnanis* (knowers of the Truth) did nothing, others would become idle. That is why all *mahatmas* (spiritually illumined souls), even after having attained the summum bonum of life, continue to discharge their svadharma until their death.

In short, when a karma yogi engages in action without concern for its outcome, his body,

mind and intellect become stronger, bolder and more luminous. The outcome of his actions becomes increasingly abundant. His mind becomes purified and wisdom dawns in his heart. By virtue of his blessed life, the society in which this role model lives becomes more enlightened and inspiring to others.

One could fall from the state of grace associated with karma yoga for one of two reasons: the likes and dislikes of the senses — attraction towards one's preferred objects of enjoyment, and aversion for those one dislikes. The twin poles of attraction-and-repulsion and lust-and-anger trouble man endlessly. That is why, at the end of this chapter, the Lord advises us to liberate ourselves from the grip of the senses. Karma yoga is nothing other than sense control, which is essential if one wishes to gain *sthita-prajna* (steady wisdom). 

(to be continued)



Ancient Wisdom for Health and Well-being

by br. sivamrita chaitanya, india

The *Ramayana* is the first Sanskrit epic poem, dating back to 7323 BCE. It is a cornerstone in the edifice of Sanatana Dharma.¹ The *Ramayana* has shaped ancient Indian culture and civilization to a great extent. But its appeal is universal, and its relevance timeless.

¹ Literally, 'Eternal Religion' or 'Eternal Way of Life,' the original and traditional name of Hinduism.

Today, a major challenge for humanity is the management (not cure) of lifestyle diseases like blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes, depression and tension. That all ailments have psychosomatic roots is now a scientifically proven fact. It would be interesting to see how the *Ramayana* offers a lifestyle solution to this global problem.

The *Ramayana* is a textbook of *dharma* for common people. Dharma can be defined as that which ensures both material prosperity and spiritual enlightenment for the individual and society, and the well-being of nature. Although the outer expressions of dharma may vary according to time, place and situation, the quintessence of dharma is nevertheless eternal; hence the adjective '*Janatana*,' which means everlasting and ever new. When an

individual follows dharma to accelerate personal development, it is called yoga. When a group or society engages in actions that uphold dharma, it is called *yajna*. The Vedas² are a treasure trove of *yajnas*, among which the *pancha maha yajnas*³ are most important. In the past, Indians used to practice these *yajnas* daily.

These *yajnas* address five relationships that, if kept harmonious, ensure happiness and prosperity at the personal and social levels. The first and foremost relation everyone has is with oneself. Most people are usually preoccupied with their own selfish interests. Hardly anyone strives to discover the true self within. The very inquiry into one's Self is a panacea for all psychological ills, especially when carried out under the guidance of a Guru.

2 Most ancient of all scriptures, originating from God, the Vedas were not composed by any human author but were revealed in deep meditation to the ancient seers.

3 Literally, 'five great *yajnas*' or ritual practices.

Like many teenagers these days, Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*, also suffered a bout of depression in His teens. After witnessing the sufferings of the world and the emptiness of luxuries, the young prince shut Himself up in His room and refused to meet anyone. Then Sage Vasishta, Guru to the royal family, went to counsel Rama. Their conversation forms the content of '*Yoga Vasistham*,' a text more voluminous than the original Valmiki *Ramayana*. The Rama who is familiar to us as an ideal human being and an incarnation of the Supreme was the outcome of this momentous meeting.

Hanuman, another key character in the *Ramayana*, also underwent a similar transformation during his search for Sita. When he reached the seashore, he had no confidence to cross the ocean. Resigned to receiving the death penalty from King Sugriva for failing the task entrusted to him, Hanuman gave up food and water,

and lay down in abject surrender. It was Jambavan who reminded Hanuman of the immortal presence of the Lord within. From that moment onwards, the centre of Hanuman's awareness shifted from the limitations of his monkey body to the infinite potential of the Self. Thereafter, not even the shadow of negative thoughts, of failure or death, crossed his mind.

Rama's divine presence facilitated the Self-realization of many characters in the *Ramayana*: Ahalya, Sutikshna, Shabari, as well as many demons. Amma has the same effect on countless people who meet Her. This goes to show the pressing need of the hour for *satsang*, i.e. the company and counsel of spiritual masters in life, especially during periods of crises.

This is the first and foremost of the pancha maha yajnas, viz. *rishi* or *brahma yajna*. However, not everyone can meet and spend time with a

mahatma (spiritually illumined soul). The next best option is to study the teachings of spiritual masters or scriptural books like the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavad Gita*, to contemplate them, and to apply the principles articulated therein in life. This consecrated act of reading for spiritual upliftment is called *svadhyaya* (literally Self study), and it was practised as a daily routine in ancient India. Typically, one would chant a portion of the Vedas before breakfast. This dedication to learning is also an expression of gratitude towards the sages who selflessly offered knowledge of the Supreme (Brahman), which they had gained through great austerities, to humanity. Whether one attains Self-realization as a result of these studies is secondary. In any case, persistent efforts in that direction makes one stronger and wiser by the day, and such a person is less afflicted by the sorrows and pains of the external world.

The rituals and practices of Sanatana Dharma are called *deva yajna*, among which *japa* (repeated chanting of a mantra) is considered very important. Devas or devatas are demi-gods with specific powers and qualities beneficial for humanity. In the past, students in India were taught the *Gayatri mantra* when they started their education. This mantra, when chanted regularly, illumines the intellect, and used to be chanted daily throughout life.

Sri Rama received many mantras from Sage Viswamitra. These mantras helped him overcome hunger and thirst, and become an invincible warrior. Before the final battle with Ravana, Rama also received from Sage Agastya a mantra of the Sun god to ensure His victory. Even today, Indians invoke the blessings of Lord Ganesha, before embarking on any new venture, to remove all obstacles to success; Saraswati, Goddess of

Learning and the Arts, before studying any subject; Goddess Lakshmi, for prosperity in business; and Goddess Durga for victory in battle or court cases. Spiritual practices such as meditation, *kriya yoga*,⁴ prayers and hymns, *archana*,⁵ bhajans, going to temples, observing vows, and fasting on specific days also fall under the category of deva yajna.

Rituals for the deceased, called *pitru yajna* (or *pitru tarpan*), are described in detail in many places in the *Ramayana*. Lord Rama ensured that obsequies (funeral rites) were performed not only for His father, but also for Jatayu, the vulture, Bali, the monkey king, and Ravana, His arch enemy. Indians used to offer water to the gods, sages and ancestors daily, usually while bathing. This ritual has its origin in the Vedas, which are much more ancient than the life and times

of Lord Rama. We all carry the 'genes' or divine potential manifested by mahatmas like Krishna, Rama and the Buddha, as well as the evil potential of villains like Ravana, Kamsa and Duryodhana. Our strengths and weaknesses depend upon which qualities, positive or negative, we consciously awaken. Modern medical research holds that if one's parents have cancer, the chances of our getting cancer are higher than for those whose parents do not have cancer. However, if we consciously follow a lifestyle that is inimical to the growth of cancer cells, cancer is less likely to visit us. Pitru tarpan forges a connection of grateful remembrance to one's ancestors. The sense of indebtedness to people past and present, and to nature awakens in us the integral sense of oneness with the universe.

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4 Ancient meditation technique.

5 Chanting of the names of a deity.

The fourth and most essential among the pancha mahayajnas is the *nru yajna* — service to humanity. We reap what we sow: this is a universal karmic law, applicable to human relations as well. The first question that should arise in the mind of one practising *nru yajna* whenever he meets another person is “How can I serve you?” This practice begins at home from childhood, when children help their parents. Festivals and social gatherings are also opportunities to practise selfless service. What we are today — our health and wealth, level of education and profession — is not the consequence of self effort, but the net result of the cumulative efforts of millions from the past and present, and of divine grace as well. Therefore, it is our duty to serve society, especially during the productive years of our life. Sharing one’s time, energy, knowledge, expertise, resources, love and compassion with

other people is *nru yajna*. Demographic studies reveal that those who enjoy health and longevity are those who have engaged in actively serving others. Lord Rama maintained a warm relationship with every being He met during His 14-year sojourn in the forest, irrespective of their social status or cultural background. The kingdoms of Kishkindha and Lanka, which He won by might, were duly returned to the rightful heirs, as He did not want to exploit their friendship in any way.

The final of the five yajnas, *bhuta yajna*, strengthens one’s connection to flora and fauna, the source of our food. Feeding fish, birds and animals; watering plants; and protecting endangered plant and animal species all fall under this category. Spending time in nature, and tending plants and pets are easy ways to reduce tension and worry. In the *Ramayana*, Rama enjoys the support of birds, monkeys,

bears and squirrels in His search for Sita. In India, traditionally one would, on waking up, pray to Mother Earth to bless all his undertakings for the day. Before standing up, one would touch the ground and humbly beg forgiveness from Mother Earth for stepping on Her. This ritual fostered a mother-child relationship with the planet. Stepping out of the house, one would pray to the sun, the source of energy for life on earth. The *surya namaskar*, or sun salutation, was an integral part of daily life. This sequence of hatha yoga exercises, which Amma encourages us to practise, keeps one healthy and energetic.


Amma says that Creator and creation are one and the same. This means that everyone and everything is a unique expression of the Supreme. Each manifestation of divine consciousness is personified as the devata of the object. Thus, there are deities associated

with the sun, moon, earth, wind and water. Our ancestors were aware that nature protects us, and not vice versa. Cleanliness, nature conservation, recycling waste, and other efforts to reduce our carbon footprint are part of bhuta yajna.

Life is best enjoyed in the fulfilment of relationships. Reading the *Ramayana*, we may think Rama's life a great tragedy. Yet, the *Ramayana* repeatedly highlights how Rama's presence was always soothing, like the cooling rays of the full moon; hence, His epithet Ramachandra ('*chandra*' means moon). Sita, whose life was filled with even more suffering than Rama's, is also described as 'moon-faced', and as one 'whose smile always preceded Her words.' Rama's twin children wander around the country, singing the glories of their parents: of Rama, who abandoned their pregnant mother in forest, and who never inquired after them.

Rama's twin children never harboured any grudge towards Rama for denying them the love of a father and a luxurious royal life. They are proud of the bond of love connecting their parents and for the sacrifice they made to uphold dharma. In spite of the hardship Rama and Sita underwent, every bride and groom in India are blessed by elders, even to this day, to lead a "life of love and contentment like that of Rama and Sita."

And yet, they never harboured any grudge towards Rama for denying them the love of a father and a luxurious royal life. They are proud of the bond of love connecting their parents and for the sacrifice they made to uphold dharma. This inner calm, and the peace and joy of many characters in the *Ramayana* arose from their harmonious relationship with the beings, both gross and subtle, around them. In spite of the hardship Rama and Sita

underwent, every bride and groom in India are blessed by elders, even to this day, to lead a "life of love and contentment like that of Rama and Sita." Amma is also teaching the world, through Her personal example and those of Her children all around the world, that love is not infatuation, but unconditional sharing and caring. Let us break out of the cages of ego and fly high and free in the skies of boundless love and devotion. 

Masala Dosa Prasad

by Padmaja Gopakumar, India

In the days before Amma left on Her two-month long North America-Japan tour, Amma was busy giving private darshan to ashram residents, including householders and monastic disciples. It goes without saying that, for the ashram residents, this darshan in Amma's room is highly cherished, a few minutes of private time



with Amma they look forward to every year. During these darshans, Amma inquires about the welfare of Her children and listens patiently to what they say. She also gives them spiritual instructions. She thus sits for weeks together, spending 10 – 15 hours a day talking to Her children.

Even so, Amma still makes it a point to come out for bhajans, meditation and, on Tuesdays, prasad distribution. If She is hard pressed for time, Amma might skip the question-and-answer session after the meditation.

It was the last Tuesday before She left for the Tour. Perhaps, She wanted Her children to be vigilant during Her physical absence, and so, asked them, “It is said that one should always be in a *sakshi bhava* (witness mode). What is *sakshi bhava*? What is meant by it?”

Amma asked one of the brahmacharis to answer. He spoke in detail about the four aspects of the *antah-karana*

(inner equipment): mind, intellect, memory and the I-sense. The mind doubts, the intellect determines, the memory remembers, and the ego creates the sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine.’ And then, there is an ‘I’ that knows all these *vruttis* (thoughts), and that is the witness.

Amma said, “You’re right. But what is the relevance of this witness attitude in life?” She asked another brahmachari to answer. He explained *sakshi bhava* by recounting an incident that happened in the Delhi Ashram. A young boy was once playing hide and seek with him. Not finding a place to hide, the boy hid behind the brahmachari. The brahmachari said that, in a sense, this is how we try to hide from the Lord, who is witness to everything.

Amma then told a story illustrating the relevance of *sakshi bhava*. Once, a Guru summoned two of his disciples. Giving each a chicken, he asked them to kill it unseen by

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anyone else and then return. After some time, both returned. The first one told the Guru that he had gone into a cave in the forest and killed the chicken there after making sure that no one was watching. The second one said, "Guru, I also went to that very cave. Sure enough, I saw no one when I looked around. But I was there as the witness. How could I kill the chicken then? I realized that I cannot do anything without my witnessing it."

Amma says that we are often not mindful of what we say, see, hear or do. We should strive to be watchful: *parayunnatu kelkumarum* (listen to what we are saying) and *cheyyunnatu kaanu-*

marum (observe what we are doing). Just as we enjoy seeing animals in a zoo from a safe distance, we must strive to be a witness to our thoughts and emotions and not get caught up by them. Giving free rein to our thoughts would be akin to letting wild beasts loose.

On the day She leaves, Amma conducts a meeting for ashram residents. She gives instructions on the running of the Math's various institutions during Her physical absence. Amma also discusses various *seva* (service) activities and spiritual practices She wants Her children to follow without fail. At the end of the meeting, She sings a bhajan. Amma does all this to make Her


children happy; She also tells them not to be sad when She is on tour. Amma assures everyone that all Her children are always in Her heart.

As if dissatisfied with all that She is giving Her children, a few years ago, Amma started distributing *masala dosa*¹ prasad to Her children before leaving. This event, in which She distributes the dosas to at least 3,000 ashram residents, has become something of a festival in Amritapuri. Before Amma comes to the hall for the evening bhajans, large dosa pans are placed on either side of the hall. Vats containing dosa batter, potato stuffing and oil are also kept ready. As soon as the bhajans end, many ashram residents rush to start making dosas. The beautiful hissing sound made when the batter is poured on the sizzling grill is truly music to the ears!

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1 Pancakes stuffed with cooked potatoes.

Amma joins the team of cooks and starts making large round dosas. In no time at all, thousands of hot dosas are ready for distribution. Amma then sits down and starts distributing plates of dosa prasad. From time to time, Amma affectionately says, “Children, Amma has given you only one dosa. Those who want more should help themselves to as many as they want.”

After everyone has been served, Amma will eat just a few pieces from the dosas Her children have lovingly made for Her, after which She will share them with others. She then continues talking to Her children, even though She has to leave soon for the airport.

All *mabatmas* (spiritually illumined souls) talk about the greatness of *anna dana* (the gift of food). In Amritapuri, along with *anna dana*, Amma’s children also get *jnana dana* (the gift of knowledge), obtaining which, nothing else remains to be gained. 

Lilas Around Amma

Tight Hug

To believe in Amma is to place all our faith and trust in Her. She has always been a guiding force for me. I regard Her as my *antaryami* (indwelling soul).

Recently, I had a severe intestinal infection, which was accompanied by diarrhoea and acute pain. I underwent an ultrasound, CT scan and blood tests. My haemoglobin level started falling, and I began to feel so tired and listless that I could barely carry out my daily activities. My condition was further aggravated by a vertigo attack. The last time I was down with vertigo and



weakness, I was given Vitamin B12 injections. This time, the doctor suggested that I be admitted to the hospital for a blood transfusion to boost my haemoglobin level. I was dead set against blood transfusions, not because of any fear of needles or pain but because it was against my conscience. Nevertheless, my husband made all the necessary arrangements. I fervently prayed to Amma to save me from this situation. I knew She would.

That night, I dreamt that a few people entered my house to take shelter from heavy rains. There was an old woman in a wheelchair; two people were with her. I received them warmly and offered them some refreshments, which they politely declined. "We will leave in a while," the old woman said. I bent down and hugged her tightly. When I pulled away, to my utter surprise, I found myself looking into Amma's face! Her eyes were twinkling like diamonds and the smile on

Her face reassured me that all would be well! I felt blessed and knew that Amma was aware of my plight and that She would show me a way out of my crisis.

For the first time in many days, I woke up feeling fresh. I called the doctor and requested him to give me B12 injections instead of a blood transfusion, and apologized for any impertinence on my part. To my surprise, he received my suggestion warmly. He said, "Okay. Come and I will make you all right."

When I went to see him, he started the course of injections. I soon started feeling much better. My haemoglobin level is still a little low but I am sure that with Amma's grace, it will normalize soon enough. The vertigo attacks stopped after a fortnight and my zest for life has returned.

My problem was resolved by that tight hug. Such is Her grace! ❧

— *Jaloo Mistry, India*