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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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# Drop Preconceived Notions

Children, if we examine how we respond to the situations we encounter, we will see that, most of the time, preconceived notions shape our responses. We must learn to regard the circumstances of our life without prejudice. We ought to be like the tailor, who takes measurements anew every time a customer wants something made. He will not make the clothing based on measurements taken previously. Knowing that one's size can change in a short span of time, the tailor will take fresh measurements every time. There is an important lesson here that we must learn: never assume anything.

Amma remembers a story. A middle-aged man was strolling with his young son in a park. The son excitedly asked, "Look, dad, isn't this a rose?"

With great joy and enthusiasm, the father replied, "Yes, son, it is."

"Is the colour of this rose what they mean by red?"

"Yes, son, this is red."

Seeing the sprawling green lawn before him, the youth asked, "Dad, is this grass? Is this the green colour?"




“Yes, son, this is grass and the colour of grass is green.”


In this way, father and son kept pointing at various things and talking in loud and excited voices. A man longing for some peace and quiet was sitting on a bench in the park. Enraged by the disturbance, he told the father, “People like me come here, hoping to enjoy some peace of mind, but because you and your son are talking so loudly, I have lost whatever peace I had. No matter what that mentally retarded kid says, you keep saying “Yes, son... yes, son.” But that’s not going to make him any better.”

Hearing this, father and son remained silent for a while. Then, regaining his composure, the father said, “Forgive us. My son isn’t retarded. He was born blind. Two days ago, he underwent a surgery to give him vision. After the bandages were removed, I wanted to take him to a place where he could see beautiful sights.

That’s why we came here. Enraptured by the beauty of this garden, which he was seeing for the first time, he asked me many questions excitedly, and I enthusiastically answered him, forgetting everything else. When one finds `treasure, how joyful one will be! In that elation, one will even forget one’s surroundings. That’s how it was with us. Please forgive us.”

Hearing this, the man felt remorseful. He begged forgiveness for having spoken such sharp words. On that day, he took a vow: “Henceforth, I will never judge anyone prematurely and get angry with him or her.”

When he realized that his anger was caused by a misunderstanding and preconceived notions, the anger turned into love and compassion. If we can patiently gauge situations, we will definitely be able to awaken the love and compassion in our hearts. May my children be able to do so. 



Some scriptural terms are like the tip of an iceberg. There is so much more meaning to them than meets the eye. For example, take ‘*kamatkrodho’bhijayate*’ — ‘from desire arises anger’ (*Bhagavad Gita*, 2.62). To understand all its implications, we need to examine the whole verse:

*dhyaayato vishayanpumsah sangasteshupajayate  
sangatsanjayate kamah kamatkrodho’bhijayate*

When the mind dwells on an object, it develops an attachment for it. From attachment arises desire, and from desire arises anger...

The following verse completes this thought.

*krodhadbbhavati sammohah  
sammohatsmrtivibbrahamah  
smrti-bbhamshad  
buddhinasho  
buddhinashatpranashyati*

...from anger arises  
delusion, delusion leads  
to a loss of memory; a  
loss of memory leads to  
an impairment of the  
intellect, which leads to  
one's ruin. (2.63)

These verses, incorporating many psychological principles, are rich in meaning and relevant to anyone and everyone. Here, Lord Krishna explains in a step by step manner how a seemingly insignificant sensual thought can lead to total disaster. Even if a spiritual seeker thinks that he has gained control over his senses, as long as he has not attained spiritual liberation, the danger of a fall is ever present. Amma has even said that a seeker can experience a

downfall a moment before God-realization.

A devotee once asked Amma, "Why is it that some seekers, even after joining the ashram, fall prey to *vasanas* (latent tendencies)?"

Amma replied, "What the Guru does is to bring out and expose the disciple's weaknesses, so that the disciple becomes aware of them and strives to overcome them. The Guru creates circumstances that stir the dormant impurities and makes the disciple conscious of them so that he can strive to rid himself of them."

Amma speaks about a type of snake in the Himalayas. Such snakes live in the frozen snow and do not attempt to bite anyone, but that is not their true nature. Once winter ends and the climate becomes warmer, the seemingly harmless snakes will show their true colours. Similarly, certain circumstances can bring out our true nature.

Let me recount an incident that makes me ashamed even now. Almost three decades ago, during my first darshan after joining the ashram, I asked Amma whether she would give me sannyasa. Amma smiled and asked me, "What do you think sannyasa is?"

Without the slightest doubt, I said, "A sannyasi is one who wears ochre robes, walks around chanting mantras, and sports *rudraksba* malas and bracelets." Such was my understanding!

Hearing this, Amma burst out laughing and said, "Son, that's not sannyasa! It does not mean dressing up at all. If you want to become a sannyasi, first burn away the dross from your mind and make it ochre. Only when that happens does one become a sannyasi."

Two weeks after this incident, I developed an aversion to the food served in the ashram, especially the curries. As far as I was concerned, there

was no correlation between the curry's name and its taste! What I found most intolerable was the *sambar*. When I began to find it totally unpalatable, I began to consider leaving the ashram. I, who had expressed a desire to become a sannyasi just a few weeks before, was now ready to leave the spiritual life just because I could not stomach the sambar!

Then I thought, "Leaving the ashram without informing Amma is a sign of ingratitude!" I felt mentally perturbed and finally decided to speak to Amma. When I went for darshan, she repeatedly said, "Tell me, son. Tell me."

I opened up to Amma. I told her that I felt like leaving the ashram. Amma asked me why. With utmost shame, I told her that I was unable to stomach the curries served here, especially the sambar. Amma roared with laughter and asked me if I had come to the ashram to drink sambar. I could not say anything, and

bent my head in shame. Then, pointing to her right, Amma said, “Son, sit here.”

I sat by her side. Within 15 minutes, that thought, which had been upsetting me so much, disappeared from my mind completely, and has never bothered me again. I realized that the mere presence of a *mabatma* (spiritually illumined soul) has the power to purify.

The scriptures clearly warn of the dangers of sensual pleasures and of the need to subdue the mind, but only a Guru can discern the spiritual state of a seeker and guide him or her accordingly. So, even if one has considerable scriptural knowledge, one still needs the guidance of a Guru. Only she can rectify the deficiencies in a seeker and lead him or her to Self-realization. Without the Guru’s grace, the disciple will undoubtedly perish.

Let me recount one of my experiences. Years ago, I had

an ardent lover — a slim, white foreigner. Her name was Marlboro... yes, it was a cigarette! I was a chain smoker, and eventually contracted mouth cancer. I underwent treatment for a long time and finally reached a critical phase when I knew that I would have to choose between cigarettes and life. When I realized that I could not give up the habit, I decided to go and see Amma, at the instigation of a friend.

I went to the Kodungallur Brahmasthanam Temple with four cartons of cigarettes, a matchbox, an air pillow, five pillow covers, and a couple of bedsheets. When I reached the temple, my friend made me register for the *Lalita Sabasaranama archana* (chanting of the 1,000 names of the Divine Mother). The devotees were accommodated in Amma’s school (Amrita Vidyalayam) in Kodungallur. I was given a mat for sleeping. For a pillow, at first, I used the cigarette



I told Amma that I felt like leaving the ashram. When she asked me why, with utmost shame, I told her that I was unable to stomach the curries served here, especially the sambar. Amma roared with laughter and asked me if I had come to the ashram to drink sambar.

cartons. I concealed them by covering them with my towel. I kept at least a few cigarette packets with me so that I could smoke during the intervals between each chanting of the *Lalita Sabaśranama* which went on from dawn to dusk. I was totally convinced that even God could not stop my urge to smoke. So, while everyone else was chanting “*Om paraśbaktyai namah*” (“Salutations to the Almighty Goddess”) after each mantra of the *Lalita Sabaśranama*, I chanted a very different mantra: “O God, at least in my next birth, please ensure that I don’t have this bad habit of smoking!”

I finished all the cigarettes that I had brought to the program by the morning of the last day of the programs. On that day, after the first archana, I went to a nearby tea-shop to buy cigarettes. As I could not find the brand of cigarettes I wanted, I had no choice but to buy a different brand. I bought all 10 packets available in that shop. The shopkeeper also gave me a matchbox. I tried to light a cigarette but somebody behind me strongly blew away the flame. When I turned around, there was no one there. I turned to another direction and tried to light it

again, and the same thing happened. I went on trying until I had exhausted the last matchstick in the box. Some invisible force was blowing the fire away! But this made me even more determined. I went to the lit stove used for making tea, and thought to myself, "If anyone is capable of blowing this away, let him or her try!"

Suddenly, at that moment, I heard an inner voice, Amma's voice, commanding me sternly to throw the cigarettes away. I threw away all the 10 packets of cigarettes, including the cigarette between my lips. I paid for the cigarettes and walked towards the Brahmasthanam Temple.

Later that night, I joined the queue for Amma's darshan. When I reached her, I didn't say anything. Amma also did not say anything to me, but I could feel the power of her penetrating gaze as it fell on my body. After darshan, I returned to the school

and laid down. Because of my illness, I used to change the pillow covers frequently at night. That night, too, in a half-asleep state, I touched my pillow. To my surprise, I did not feel the wetness of the blood-clotted pus and saliva that used to ooze out of my mouth. Wonderstruck, I went to the bathroom, stood before the mirror, opened my mouth, and looked inside. My inner cheeks had become as fleshy as they used to be before the cancer struck. I could not believe it! At first, I thought that Amma might have performed some black magic to create this illusion, but I soon realized that Amma had healed me purely by her *sankalpa* (divine resolve).

However, for the longest time, even after I joined the ashram, I could not shake away the sense of disbelief at what had happened. At around this time, Amma was about to leave for her North Indian Tour. It was the second such

tour after I joined the ashram, and I was expecting my name to be in the list of brahmacharis accompanying Amma on the tour. It was not. Though disappointed, I consoled myself, thinking that I would get a chance the following year. But the same thing continued to happen in the years that followed...

With each passing year, the disbelief began to grow stronger. But I did not disclose this to Amma. After four years, when I saw that my name was still not on the list whereas the name of a brahmachari who had just joined the ashram was, I became disillusioned. I felt that it was probably because Amma did not have faith in me and that she did not want such people to accompany her.

On the one hand, I loved Amma, but on the other hand, I was frustrated and sad. Gradually, this frustration turned into contempt for ashram life. But owing to my love

for Amma, I could not bear to leave the ashram either. Finally, I decided to test Amma. I thought, if Amma is truly Parashakti (the Almighty Goddess), then she should know my mind. I decided that I would continuously chant a mantra that I had composed from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. on the day Amma was leaving for the tour; I would eat nothing and only drink water in that time. I wanted Amma to tell me that mantra I was chanting before she left for the tour. If she did, I would never disbelieve Amma ever again; nor would I ever leave her. But if Amma failed this test, I would leave the ashram as soon as she left for the tour.

I began chanting at 6 o'clock in the morning of the day Amma was leaving. I chanted without moving my lips or without any sound. I drank some water in the afternoon and continued chanting until the evening. The mantra that I had composed and which

Amma was supposed to tell me was, “Even if your name is not on the list of brahmacharis accompanying Amma for the North Indian tour, you should come for Amma’s Kodungallur program.”

After my chanting ended, I went for the evening bhajans, ate dinner, and returned to my hut. My roommate asked me to wake him up at 11 p.m. and went to sleep. I sat outside on the veranda. The night was bright with moonlight and there was pin-drop silence. Suddenly, a brahmachari came to me and sympathetically asked, “Brother, you’re not going on the tour, are you?”

Hiding my grief, I told him, “I can go next year.” He then told me that he would come near the car with Swamiji’s bags shortly before Amma left and he would then let me know exactly when Amma was leaving. He added, “You’ll get a darshan of Amma without the usual crowd. So, be happy.”

I continued sitting there, feeling anger towards the whole universe. At around 11 o’clock, the tour buses arrived. The ashram residents going for the tour boarded the buses, which started leaving at 11:30 p.m. After that, Amma’s car was parked near where the main stage is now. The brahmachari who had promised to tell me Amma’s departure time informed me that Amma was leaving in five minutes. He also showed me where I could wait and have her darshan.

As soon as he left, I went and hid behind a screen of plants and trees, near where the Indian canteen is now. Amma would never find me there. I did not want her to see me either. I then saw Amma walking towards the car; a few people were with her. When I saw her, I reverentially prostrated and mentally bid her farewell. My heart was beating so loudly that I could hear it. Amma opened the door to

the car and put one leg inside. I was peering through the leaves. I saw Amma remaining in that position for some time. Suddenly, Amma withdrew her leg and started looking around. Turning around, she started running towards my hideout. I thought she was looking for someone else who might have been longing for her darshan. She came around the plants where I was hiding and held me close to her. She asked, "Son, are you so sad because you're not able to go for the tour?"

I couldn't say anything but began to cry. Then Amma whispered into my ears, "After the Indian tour, Amma has a program in Kodungallur. You can come for that."

All my doubts ceased. Amma knows everything. She creates all the circumstances.

The seva that Amma gives us will help us overcome our vasanas. No matter how much effort we put in, we can overcome our vasanas only by the

Guru's grace. Doing one's seva sincerely will make us deserving of her grace.

The Guru's greatest miracle is elevating the disciple from the state of incompleteness to completeness. The Guru-disciple lore is replete with instances of Gurus uplifting souls from the pit of self-destruction to the heights of Self-realization. Because a Guru is all-knowing, one who has subdued desires, an epitome of all noble qualities, and a knower of the Truth, the disciple who is ready to obey her words unquestioningly becomes eligible for Self-realization. If we do not like the seva that the Guru has assigned us, our *sadhana* (spiritual practice) is to learn to like it.

As the process of inner purification is long and as the seeker is prone to downfalls, the Guru's presence is very important. The senses are more powerful than we realize and they can easily trap a

seeker. He or she should regard sense pleasures as poison and relinquish them.

Sensual thoughts are the cause of a spiritual downfall. When the desires arising from the constant dwelling upon such thoughts are thwarted, we become enraged. This wrath will lead to indiscriminate behaviour. The deluded state of mind paves the way to forgetfulness, which will destroy the intellect, and thus seal our fate.

Once, a scientist wanted to make a discovery that would benefit the whole of mankind. He thought that if he could convert seawater into fuel, there would be a permanent solution to the energy crisis facing the whole world. Many rich friends came forward to help him financially. A laboratory to conduct experiments was set up in the USA. Many famous scientists came forward to assist him. Despite trying continuously for 15 years, he did not succeed.

Those who came to help him gradually left, one by one.

But a friend in India with whom he used to exchange emails stood by him. When the scientist stopped communicating with him, the friend decided to visit the scientist. When he reached the laboratory, the scientist told him that he was going to abandon further research as all his efforts had led him to a dead end. The friend said, "Do not give up. Go and see a Lama in Tibet and ask for a solution. Your problems will be solved and your research will be fruitful." The friend added that there were three conditions attached to the consultation: 1. he should frame the problem in a single sentence; 2. he should walk to the abode of the Lama, continuously chanting that question like a mantra; 3. he would be allowed to ask just one question.

The scientist agreed to all these conditions and went to see the Lama with great

expectations. When he reached the Lama's residence, the watchman told him, "Follow this path. It will lead you to a small hill. Climb that hill, which has 108 steps. At each step, recite the question that you want to ask the Lama. Once you reach the top of the hill, you will find the Lama sitting there. On seeing you, the Lama will ask you to ask the question to which you want an answer. Remember, you will not get an opportunity to ask another question."

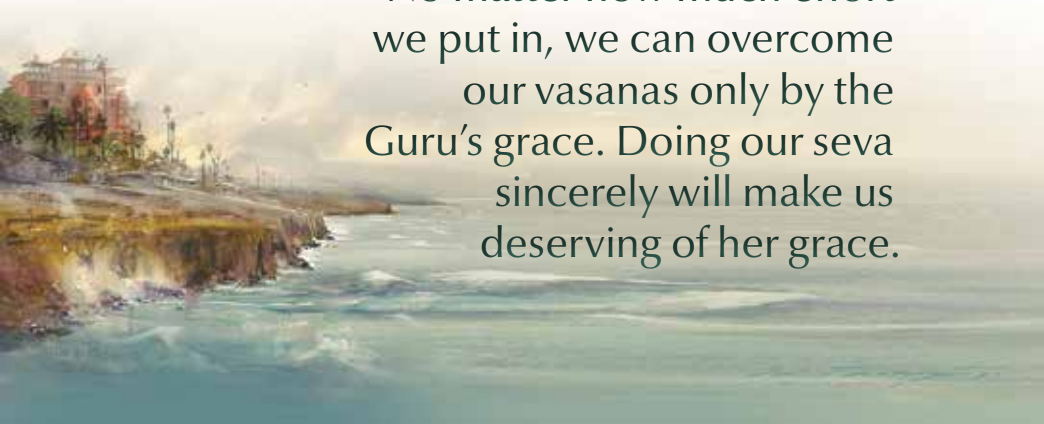
The scientist did as instructed. After he had climbed all the 108 steps, he saw a young and extremely beautiful woman seated on a golden

throne. He was surprised because he had been expecting an old, wizened man with a long, flowing beard. The Lama asked the scientist, "What is your question?"

The question that the scientist had planned to ask the Lama was "How to convert seawater into fuel?" Instead, he asked, "Madam, are you married?"

This story illustrates the strength of vasanas. Even on our deathbed, these vasanas can create havoc. Only the Guru's grace can save us in such situations. May Amma mercifully shower her grace on all of us and help us overcome all such situations. 🌸

No matter how much effort we put in, we can overcome our vasanas only by the Guru's grace. Doing our seva sincerely will make us deserving of her grace.





# The Value of Forgiveness

by veena o'sullivan, australia

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Forgiveness doesn't excuse their behaviour. Forgiveness prevents their behaviour from destroying your heart.”

— The Buddha



“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that have trespassed against us.”

— Matthew 6:12

“Always remember that your true family is the family of humankind. When your left hand is injured, doesn’t your right hand go to its aid? For both are part of your body and you consider them yours. In the same spirit of unity, lovingly serve your sisters and brothers, forgive their faults, and be willing to suffer for one another. That is the essence of spirituality.”

— Amma

**W**e have all been there! We know how livid we can be when someone hurts us. We nurse the hurt, relive the event, ruminate on revenge, and before we know it, we allow it to rule our lives for a long, long time.

The subject of forgiveness has been addressed over aeons by ancient mythology, fables, psychological treatises, modern neuroscience and, of course, all the great spiritual masters. All of them strive to impress upon us the vital importance of forgiving. The message that consistently comes from them is that forgiveness frees us from negative emotions and heals us.

Cultivating forgiveness strengthens other qualities such as patience, forbearance, fortitude as well as appreciation of oneself and others. Health benefits derived from the practice of forgiveness and the letting go of negative emotions include decreased anxiety and stress, healthier blood pressure, improved heart health, a lowered risk of depression, and stronger immunity.

What does forgiveness mean? First and foremost, it means to give up anger and resentment. It also means to release blame, to pardon an offence, and to stop seeking recompense.

We often forget an incident where the action was of little consequence, for example, being cut off by a motorist while driving. We may get annoyed at the time, but rather than consciously forgiving the offender, we are likely to forget the incident. Forgiveness means being aware of an injustice and choosing to eliminate anger. Yet, many times, we find it difficult to forgive those who hurt us. There are situations where we may want justice and therefore find it hard to let someone off the hook, morally or legally. We may hold on to a grudge because we fear that by letting go, we are condoning bad behaviour. To truly forgive requires an inner transformation.

The following two are striking examples of the power of forgiveness. In both cases, forgiveness and pursuing justice went hand in hand.

Early in March 2020, Leila Geagea, the mother of three

children killed by a drunk driver, said that she forgave him. “But I want the court to be fair. I’m not going to hate him because that’s not who we are.”

She added that her faith in Jesus has helped her family cope. She asked herself, “What would Jesus do in this situation?” She viewed the action as morally reprehensible, and wanted justice, but because she loved God, she was willing to free herself from the tangles of anger and revenge. In doing so, surely she played a vital role in helping the drunk driver repent and change for the better.

Garry Lynch’s deeply moving story of personal change and spiritual growth shows how good can come from evil. He was the father of Anita Cobby, who was brutally murdered in the early 1980’s. The case was highly publicized. He and his wife fought for justice and, in doing so, were instrumental in assisting the police

find the perpetrators. In 1993, along with the parents of another homicide victim, they founded the 'Homicide Victims' Support Group.' Over the ensuing years, Mr. Lynch worked tirelessly to support people who had lost their loved ones to homicide. He was also a member of the Serious Offenders Review Board, which is responsible for the management of all prisoners identified as serious offenders in New South Wales. Mr. Lynch played a significant role in helping these prisoners undergo rehabilitation and in preparing them for potential release into the community. Clearly, his journey to forgiveness made him more compassionate, more appreciative of all human life, and better able to see the potential for goodness in those most hated by society.

Forgiveness is not about releasing others from accountability for their actions. It is about not allowing their actions to define who we are.

There are innumerable instances of ordinary people, not just saints, who, after suffering deep trauma, regained inner control and allowed goodness to flow. In the words of Victor Frankel, who survived unimaginable suffering in Nazi concentration camps, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way."

### How to Forgive

Let me share two incidents from my life that have compelled me to reflect on the value of forgiveness. Although relatively minor in the larger scheme of things, they caused me pain. I am still learning how to forgive, and by no means claim competence on the subject.

A woman I know is frequently mean-spirited. She seems to have no empathy for others, and time and again is

hurtful in her words and actions. Many people in our circle have been subjected to her rudeness, verbal abuse, belittling, attention seeking, tantrums, and her manipulative ways. She makes life difficult for everyone around her when she does not get her way. Her behaviour is so challenging that many people keep away from her.

Although distancing myself helps, sometimes I am forced to be near her. In such situations, I ask myself what Amma would want me to do. I imagine she would tell me that if I cannot love her, then I should try not to hate her at least. When I bring myself into the present moment, letting go of thoughts of the past, I find it easier to rein my mind into 'neutral.' In this state of calm, I am able to be polite and pleasant. I minimize conversation, especially one that is likely to aggravate the situation. If she is being difficult, I strive to stay centred and not

return the abuse (even mentally). Yet, I need to have the courage to speak up against wrongdoing. I do so only if circumstances permit, and simply state facts in generalized terms rather than making personal accusations.

When I distance myself from her, I find that my mind is more settled. It is not polluted by her behaviour. At these times, I do not criticize her or dwell on her actions. I also find that when there is some separation, there is space to view things in a larger context. I try to understand the sources of her behaviour. Perhaps, she suffered neglect or abuse as a child. While that understanding does not excuse bad behaviour, it softens my heart.

My responsibility is to correct myself, to become a more loving person, and in some way to embrace her. I include her in my daily prayers, but not condescendingly: "O God, please let her be a better person. Stop her from being so

nasty. Keep her away from me.” Rather, I pray to Amma to help me release the anger and bitterness I feel towards her. I also ask Amma to bestow peace and happiness on her.

I made this same plea to Amma regarding another person. A few years ago, I found myself suddenly walking out of a long relationship with someone whom I deeply respected and who mentored me. For some months before that, I started feeling uncomfortable with our meetings but could not figure out what the discomfort was about. One day when I was on tour with Amma, I found myself praying to her, saying that I did not understand my unease and asked her to show me the way ahead. When I met the person shortly thereafter, he became verbally abusive. His behaviour was more shocking and hurtful than on any other occasion. However, my inner protectress must have arisen. I walked away, saying, “I’m not

prepared to be treated like this anymore.”


After leaving, I felt tremendous relief, which confirmed that what I did was right. However, there was a cost to leaving the situation: I had to give up something I loved, namely the subject of our shared interest. My integrity, however, was more valuable. Over the next few months, I learnt to watch my own feelings and not suppress them. Shock, hurt, sadness, feelings of injustice, anger and hatred arose. However, I also had to allow them to pass and not let them rule me. I realized that this person had become increasingly overfamiliar with me, and that he was slandering me and abusing his position of power for some time. I spent time reflecting on my own behaviour: had I inadvertently allowed him to be abusive? I felt that I had been complicit only in not speaking up earlier because I had not exercised enough self-awareness. I had

foolishly dismissed his inappropriateness out of naïveté and a sense of loyalty. For this, I had to forgive myself.

It took me a long time to come to terms with the situation and to make peace with what happened. I had to consciously and regularly extricate my mind from reliving the events. Slowly, the scars softened. I restored goodwill in my heart by asking myself, “What would Amma do?” It is possible that she would tell me to let go of the past. Amma may remind me that everything is ephemeral — friendships and feelings come and go, and so, better to concentrate on the eternal, on God. She may tell me not to expect anything from others, and to accept them for who they are. Amma may tell me to take difficulty in stride and not be aggravated by it, but to learn from it. Maybe, she would tell me to distinguish the man from his behaviour and to focus on the goodness in him. I believe that Amma would want

me to focus on my *sadhana* (spiritual practices) instead of wasting precious energy worrying about this or that.

Reflecting on the value of forgiveness has now become a daily practice for me. For a few minutes a day, I visualize myself forgiving those who have harmed me, and release anger and resentment at Amma’s feet. I seek forgiveness from those I have knowingly or unknowingly harmed in thought, word or deed. Finally, in my visualization, I forgive myself, and surrender all guilt to Amma. Even though I have not mastered the art of forgiveness, it has become an essential contemplation in cultivating peace.

Amma is the embodiment of forgiveness, unconditionally accepting us and loving us for who we are. She says, “Now our hearts are closed buds that harbour anger, jealousy and selfishness. But when love flows and washes away the impurities, our hearts will flower and bless the world.” 



## Chapter 13: Yoga of Distinguishing the Field and its Knower

by Prof. V. Muraleedhara Menon, India

The *Bhagavad Gita* contains practical principles of living that will guide us through all our trials and tribulations.

Chapter 13 complements the earlier discussion on *karma yoga* (yoga of action). Every object has an outer form and an inner

essence. This applies to *karma* (action) as well. The outcome of an action is its form, and the mental purification gained from karma yoga is its essence.

This chapter also discusses the difference between the body and the Self. We must use our faculty of discrimination to distinguish between the body and the Self, and engage in Self-inquiry. Our biggest failing is mistaking ourselves to be the body. From childhood onwards, all our conditioning is body-based. It is the body that is pampered or punished. What happens as a result? We grow up thinking of ourselves as the body.

So long as we persist in such thinking, we cannot evolve. Only if we regard the body as a tool for performing spiritual practices can we liberate ourselves from our shortcomings and grow spiritually. This awareness — that we are not the body but the Self that animates the body — must be inculcated from childhood.

To understand the ins and outs of a game, we need to stand aside and observe it being played. Similarly, when we distance ourselves from the body, mind and intellect, and see them as a witness, we understand their workings.

However, we lavish time and energy on nurturing the body alone, paying little attention to Self-inquiry. Sometimes, we eat indiscriminately with no thought of how food affects our body and mind. We hardly think about what kind of food makes the intellect *sattvic* (calm and subtle) and the heart pure. But no matter how much we look after the body, feeding or beautifying it, it will eventually be reduced to ash. But the Self, which enlivens the body, does not die. Life becomes meaningful only when we understand that it is meant for doing spiritual practices to realize the eternal Self.

The body should be taken care of so that it can continue



fulfilling its *svadharma* (work suited to one's nature) for as long as possible. When the body is worn out, it will drop away.

As long as we are attached to the body and harbour the fear of death, we cannot advance spiritually. Our spiritual progress is guaranteed to the extent we have faith in Parashakti (Almighty), the sole basis of life. The more this faith grows, the greater our advancement to the goal. We will not grow as long as we confine ourselves only to body-centric deeds. Until then, the Self will be no more than a witness.

When our consciousness of what is right and noble is roused, we gradually evolve from an animalistic life to a virtuous one. When we engage in *tapas* (austerities) for self-purification, we will become aware of how weak and ill-prepared we are, and how much in need we are of God's grace. We then supplicate the

Lord with piteous cries for his grace. We will then experience God, the most merciful one, coming to our aid.

Here, the Lord acts as a protector. In the next stage, when we realize that our actions have borne fruit only by his blessings, and when we offer that fruit to him in gratitude, the Lord accepts it. He then becomes the enjoyer.

Eventually, we must renounce all thoughts about action. Action has three aspects: thoughts pertaining to it, the actual doing, and the fruits of action. Once we have totally surrendered the fruits of our actions to God, we will come to the realization that we were not even the doers of those actions but only a tool in the hands of the Divine. Then, all actions become sanctified. We will have no sense of being a doer. With this, our evolution becomes complete. Life becomes divine. What remains is only the veneer of the body. Once that is removed, the *atma*

(Self) and *paramatma* (supreme self) become one.

*upaḍrashtanumanta ca bharata bhokta maheshwara*

The supreme Lord is the witness, permitter, supporter, enjoyer and ultimate controller. (13.23)

Thus, we gradually gain the experience of the Supreme. At first, the Supreme is only a witness. He then encourages and protects, and finally, he enjoys. As an enjoyer, he accepts the action, the fruits of it,

and the thoughts behind it. When we are totally surrendered, a perfect instrument in his hands, how blessed our life becomes! We must saturate our life with the Divine.

For this to happen, our life must become completely aligned with dharma. Through self-effort and with God's grace, we can progress. We must continually discriminate between truth and untruth, and accept only what is true.



*(to be continued)*

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## *Dear Readers,*

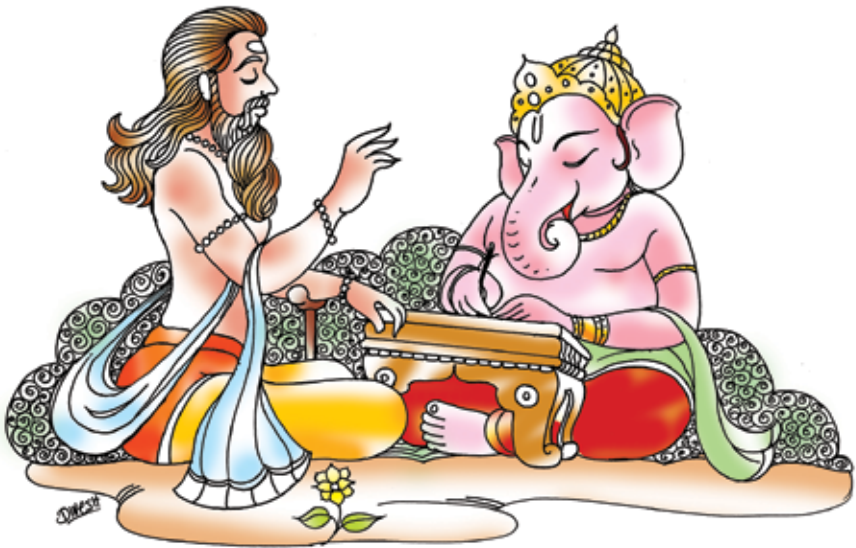
Share your experiences, poems or artwork, and inspire thousands. Even if you think your contribution is small or insignificant, it may be of great value to many.

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# Bharat is Born

by Sanoop Sadanandan, India

The ancients hailed the *Mahabharata* as a work of supreme wisdom. Many have explored its myriad facets, and interpretative efforts continue to this day. Yet others have assimilated its ethos and live by it. Not a few see the epic as a priceless literary gem. It is also a perennial source of spiritual succour. For those who



have lost their way in the dark moments of life, the *Mahabharata* sheds the light of discernment.

The *Mahabharata* reveals, through a 250-year-long narrative history of the kings of the Bharata Dynasty, the innermost secrets of both the physical and spiritual sciences of ancient India. At its core, the book is about seeking and finding *dharma*.<sup>1</sup>

There is a common and banal view of this great epic as a narrative of a disastrous family conflict. Some people even say that one should not keep the book at home so as not to disrupt domestic peace and harmony!

But the *Mahabharata* is actually a clarion call of love and peace to humanity. Sage Vyasa, the illustrious author, has hidden rare and wondrous insights in its depths. It is to unearth these gems that

people continue to undertake the pilgrimage of perusing the *Mahabharata*.

As the story proceeds to unveil layer after layer of truths, at one point the author declares that truth is dharma. And at another, he says that non-violence is dharma. Yet, on another occasion, he says that to protect dharma, one must wage war, if necessary. But, at the end, the sage of profound wisdom and intense austerities declares that the truth of dharma is veiled and that it is better to follow the way of the *mahatmas* (spiritually illumined souls).

What distinguishes the *Mahabharata* from other epics is the way in which it magically makes the reader identify with each of its characters in turn. The author and his scribe, Lord Ganesha, are also characters. Sage Vyasa

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1 'That which upholds (creation);' generally, used to refer to the harmony of the universe, a righteous code of conduct, sacred duty or eternal law.

begins this great epic by explaining the circumstances that led him to compose it.

### The Beginning

More than 5,000 years ago, a *yajna* (sacred fire ceremony) was held in Naimisharanya (Naimisha Forest) under the guidance of Sage Shaunaka. When Ugrashravas — son of Lomaharsha, disciple of Vyasa, and an adept in interpreting the *Puranas*<sup>2</sup> — came to participate in the *yajna*, he was accorded a traditional welcome by monks, who sat around him, hoping to hear words of wisdom. After the initial exchange of pleasantries, Ugrashravas began his narration.

“...For some days, I participated in the *sarpa-satra* (snake sacrifice) conducted by Janamejaya, son of Parikshit. There, I spent time listening

to Sage Vaishampayana, a disciple of Sage Vyasa who narrated stories from the *Mahabharata* for the benefit of Janamejaya. Thereafter, I went on a pilgrimage to several holy places. On my way here, I also dropped in at the Samanta-panchaka in Kurukshetra (where the Mahabharata War took place)...”

He continued, “What stories can I tell you, O great ones, who have performed *yajnas* and other austerities, and attained spiritual illumination?”

The assembled seekers said that they had heard that the *Mahabharata* contained the essence of the Vedas and Upanishads, and that it offered solutions to all problems. The epic also contains the subtlest meanings of all the scriptures. Therefore, they said that they wanted to hear

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<sup>2</sup> Compendium of stories — including the biographies and stories of gods, saints, kings and great people — allegories and chronicles of great historical events that aim to make the teachings of the Vedas simple and available to all.

the story. Thereupon, Ugrashravas straightened his back and started the narration.

Various people have narrated the wondrous tales from the epic. Many more will recount them in the future.

It is said that the cosmos emerged when everything was engulfed in darkness. Thereafter, there were successive creations, each lasting for aeons. After a hundred trillion years, each cycle of creation ends and merges again into *Brahman*.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the cycle of the rise and fall of creation continues endlessly...

On earth were born the Kuru race, Yadava clan, the Yayati lineage and the Ikshvaku dynasty, among others, and within each of them were born innumerable generations.

Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa,<sup>4</sup> the Vyasa of the present age, was born to Sage Parashara and Satyavati, a fisher-girl. Sage Vyasa, who gained the peak of spiritual strength through his exemplary *tapas* (austerities), first created in his mind the stories of the *Mahabharata*. While he was wondering how to transmit them to his disciples, Brahma, the Creator of the universe, appeared before him.

Vyasa prostrated before Brahma and shared with him the plot of the epic. Brahma knew that no other earthly being would ever create anything to surpass this magnum opus. He asked Lord Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, to inscribe the text in its entirety.

*(continued on page 42)*

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3 Ultimate truth, beyond any attributes; the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent substratum of the universe; the impersonal Godhead.

4 One of Sage Vyasa's epithets. Krishna refers to his dark complexion. Dvaipayana means island-born. Vyasa means compiler.

## Adore

May I adore You, Amma,  
Like a flower looks to  
the sun.

This life will come and go  
seed sprouting, shoot rising,  
budding, blooming,  
ultimately wilting,  
always facing the sun.  
Isn't that the meaning  
of *adore*? To look to  
the ore, the gold?

When this precious boon of a flower  
drips and falls away,  
may my thoughts soar to You,  
the sun, the very essence  
of life.



Elizabeth McCarthy, U.S.A.

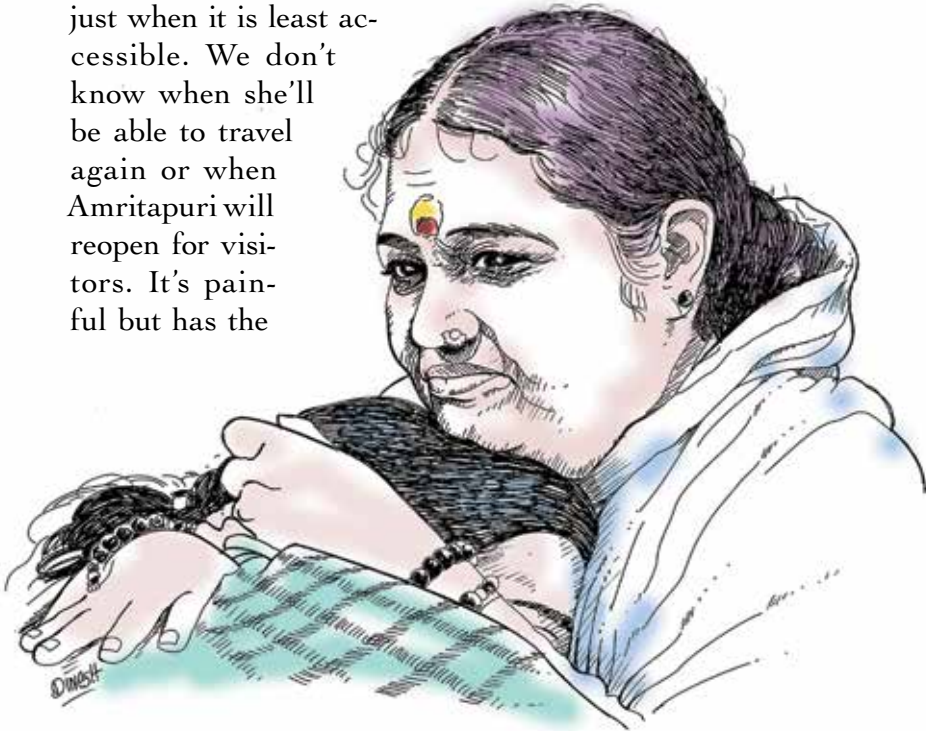


DIARY

# We Are Amma's Prasad

by Kamala Joy, U.S.A.

**I**t's a strange time for Amma devotees. With everything happening across the globe in our countries, states, towns, communities and homes, the longing for Amma's physical presence is intense, just when it is least accessible. We don't know when she'll be able to travel again or when Amritapuri will reopen for visitors. It's painful but has the





potential to be radically transformative. For me, the situation has revealed a whole nest of hidden ideas and assumptions that are plainly wrong and which have been negatively affecting my relationship with her and my ability to assimilate her message.

There is a beautiful shift when I truly align with Amma, one that I call the iron filing moment. Everything that's not pure love vanishes. The huge burden of ego lightens, and it's as if every cell of my body, being, and soul simultaneously relaxes. I experience that relaxation as a sort of falling forward in awe, as if all the many layers of my soul and self spontaneously bow down in ecstasy, gratitude, remembrance and relief, just as iron filings get aligned in the presence of a powerful magnet.

Searching for that shift in her physical absence, I've wistfully caressed materials from darshans and Devi Bhavas past, hoping the residual

Amma vibes from the candy wrapper or flower petal or *vibbuti* (sacred ash) packet will rekindle it. I have talked to photos of Amma, hoping to see her eyes move or feel a rush of her presence. I have sat in front of my altar and cried. But I forget that I myself am Amma's prasad. We all are.

Think about it. Even on a physical level, the candy wrapper or the flower petal was in her hands for less than a second. We have been in her arms for many seconds, even if we have had only one darshan. You may have had dozens. But I see lately that I have been considering darshan and Amma's programs as sort of spiritual chiropractic adjustments that need to be redone repeatedly after everything reverts to its old position. Worse, there has been a sort of assumption or expectation that it would take a certain number of darshans—a specific, to-be-achieved-later amount of time in her presence—before I

reached some threshold quantity where it would all stick permanently. And that this unspecified amount of time would only be reduced if I'm physically near to her.

Way worse: in a subtle but powerful way, I have harboured the bizarre and insane belief that, somehow, I'm powerful enough to dilute the depth charge of love, bliss, and consciousness that Amma planted inside me in my first and every subsequent darshan. Deep down, I have assumed that the pressure of my tendencies, as well as the impurities of my thoughts, words, and actions can, and have, changed or even reversed what Amma activated in me. Believing this is like thinking that shaking a water pot with a reflection of the sun will somehow disturb the sun itself.

She has not given any of us something we lacked but restored access to or upgraded the connection to what we already are. When my sadhana

is strong and regular, I can sometimes feel her presence within or around me, or both. But there is a quicker way, and that's *seva* (selfless service). Somehow, *seva* activates her presence right away and there is more immediate access to those iron filing moments. I seem to become a completely different person within minutes – a joyful, purposeful, connected person influencing the world in a positive way. It's remarkable!

All I have to do is decide to smile at every one I pass on the sidewalk or in stores, and minutes later, I'm feeling like I'm at Amma's program. Or, I can overcome my resistance (I'm soooo busy! I need to rest. My aunt's second cousin's third husband might stop by. I need to read my Facebook feed again...) and sign up to volunteer for a day or a few hours or a weekend. I will almost certainly think up a ton of excuses not to show up, feel resistance on the way there,

maybe almost turn back, maybe almost pick up my phone to explain that I have a headache, forgotten appointment, misaligned sock drawer, sick kid, or urgent business elsewhere. And 100% of the time on the way home, I'll feel clear, peaceful, relaxed, hopeful, and deeply connected to Amma, as if I were at one of her programs. If I play a bhajan on the way back, I am likely to feel waves of bliss and deep devotion, and that precious iron filing moment might happen.

Amma has told us so many times that she is always with us. We have been told that she's in everything. If we could actually experience this, now, today, and make it the basis of our expression in the world, it would change the world, and I feel that this is what's being called for right now.

In Swami Amritaswarupananda's wonderful newest book, *The Irresistible Attraction of Divinity*, he tells a beautiful

story. Amma was finishing a retreat at the Gold Coast in Australia, and shortly before departing for the airport, she wandered out to the beach, followed by a throng of devotees, eventually standing long enough to give darshan to them and a number of joggers, swimmers, and surfers who showed up. As she left, Swami was overcome with the desire to take some of the sand she had sanctified by standing on it for so long.

As he held it reverentially to his forehead, Amma turned back and said, "Son, how much love and devotion you have for the handful of sand taken from where Amma stood. But you've forgotten one thing, my son. Every grain of sand on this earth bears the imprint of Amma's feet. She has trod on every single speck. Therefore, you should strive to develop the same love and reverence you have for that handful of sand towards all objects, big and

small, in the world, towards every atom.”

What if I had that feeling at least about myself, whom Amma has held so closely and lovingly? Had it for other devotees, who Amma has also held? What if I were to directly experience the truth of her statement that she has “trod on every single speck” of everything I see? What would happen to the craving for her physical presence if I were to see the imprint of her feet in my own heart? I know I don’t usually feel this lack when I get into action and do something helpful or kind. Being helpful and kind seems to activate what is already within me.

I am reminded of a story a devotee recently told me. Amma visited her home in Cochin once and afterwards, several *tulsi* (sacred basil) plants that had not been growing started to shoot up dramatically. Within six months, one of the plants was almost

six feet high. If even plants can respond with so much vigour and vitality, what about us? Could kindness and service be like the sun and nutrition for what she has planted inside all of us?

During tours, both during, pre- and post-program, I am especially aware and attuned to Amma’s presence. I think it might be possible, or even inevitable, for me to experience this presence even more strongly by consciously helping it flower through service.

Years ago, after a darshan, I envisioned Amma holding, hugging and kissing us and sending us out into the world as living carriers of her love, like living chocolate kisses. Today I believe this more firmly. We are Amma’s prasad, and the world desperately needs us. I don’t need to do anything dramatic. I just need to do what I can in my immediate environment and grace will take care of the rest.



# Lilas Around Amma

## Umbrella of Grace

Early in August 2003, I met an astrologer in Mumbai. When he looked at my horoscope, he said that I needed to be careful about a possible fire accident. Hearing this, I became frightened as another astrologer had also told me about a big risk to my life when I was 50 years old. I was born on August 21st, 1953, and was going to turn 50 soon. I started chanting the mantra I received from Amma more frequently.



## Amma's grace saved me from painful burns by fire. Her presence protected me from my own malefic karma.

My family had earlier booked tickets to Kochi for *Amritavarsham 50*, Amma's 50th birthday celebrations. On September 27th, we reached the venue at 8 a.m. There were announcements that darshan tokens would be issued where we were seated, and we were asked not to leave our seats. As it was very hot, my family members returned to our accommodation. I stayed, determined to get Amma's darshan.

At noon, hearing an announcement that tokens would be distributed outside, I stood up. My vision became blurred and I could not see anyone. Somehow, I went outside and collected darshan tokens. I then took an auto-rickshaw back to where we were staying.

When I reached the accommodation, my family members asked me what happened to my face. When I looked at the

mirror, I realized that my face, neck and hands were charred.

That night, all of us had Amma's darshan.

After we returned to Mumbai, I went to see a doctor, who said that it was sunburn, and that the burnt skin would peel away when it was dry. It took 10 days for the charred skin to peel away. Throughout this episode, I did not experience any pain.

After a few years, while watching *Sandhya Deepam* on Amrita TV, I learnt that burns are not necessarily from fires; one can also get sunburnt.

It is my conviction that Amma's grace had saved me from painful burns by fire. Her presence had acted as an umbrella protecting me from my own malefic karma. I bow down humbly at her feet.

— *Vanajakshy Laksbmanan,*  
*India*

## She Hears Our Prayers

The following experience took place in 2017, when I was managing a team in a large IT firm. A new leader, who was based in another city and visiting us for a meeting with my team, took over the project and met each team member personally. One of my subordinates complained about me. When asked about it, I tried to explain my stand to both the new leader and the human resource department. Alas, my words fell on deaf ears. I was asked to look for a new project or leave the organization.

I was shocked and felt bad that nobody was prepared to listen to my side of the story. However, my family members and I were sure that our beloved Amma would never forsake us. I sincerely prayed to her. Meanwhile, I started looking out for new projects, but the prospects of finding either a new project or job seemed slim.

I called my sisters, who were in Amritapuri, and told them about my situation. I asked them to speak to Amma about it and to seek her advice. They did, and Amma said, “He is going through a very bad period now. Tell him to pray intensely.”

My entire family prayed with me. However, the situation did not seem to be getting any better. I continued to look for alternative projects. I never gave up hope as I strongly felt that Amma would help. I had surrendered my problems to her.

In the meantime, my sisters discussed my problem with a resident of the Amritapuri Ashram who advised my sisters to write a letter explaining everything in detail. She said she would keep the letter in Amma’s room. My sisters wrote the letter, which was kept in Amma’s room.

The very next day, I got a call from the office, informing me that there was a vacancy

in another city and that they were looking for people with my skills. I was interviewed, selected for the job, and asked to join within a week.

This was a great relief to me and my family. I firmly believe that this turn of events came about purely by Amma's grace. She heard our prayers

and helped us. This experience proves that sincere calls never go unanswered. Amma listens to even our smallest prayers. She is an ocean of compassion. All she wants is to see her children happy and smiling. Thank you, Amma!



— Anand Iyer, India

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(continued from page 52)

As soon as Brahma left, Vyasa invoked Ganesha. After duly worshipping him, the sage humbly requested Lord Ganesha to help him record what was in his mind. Ganesha agreed, on one condition: "Once you start dictating, there should be no break in your narration that will allow me to put down my quill."

Vyasa thought for a while and assented. "All right. If that is so, you must write only after having fully understood what I have said."

The all-knowing Ganesha agreed. Thus began the com-

position of the *Mahabharata*. From time to time, Vyasa would dictate difficult verses containing extremely subtle meanings. In the brief time it took Ganesha to hear, reflect, understand and inscribe them, Vyasa would compose the next few verses in his mind.

Human minds are lotuses mired in the darkness of spiritual ignorance. The Vedas, Upanishads and other scriptures are the moonlight that will help those lotuses blossom. The greatest of all epics, the *Mahabharata*, which is the soul of all scriptures, is the full moon. 