



Contents

Vol. 32, No. 1

Freedom from Sorrow 5

The Boat of Our Lives 7

swamini suvidyamrita prana

“Come and get it!” 15

aruna binuraj, u.s.a.

Chapter 8: Yoga of the

Imperishable Brahman 21

prof. v. muraleedhara menon,
india

Saga of Sita 25

anushree (rondine twist), belize

Greek Tribute to her Indian Foe 31

br. rupesh, india

Ark of Bhajans 35

kamala joy, u.s.a.

The Cry 38

janine naveena canan, u.s.a.

Lilas Around Amma 39

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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Freedom from Sorrow

Children, knowingly or unknowingly, we seek happiness through every action. We long to be free from all sorrow. However, our search may not be an informed or mindful one.

Every experience of sorrow carries a message. Suppose we accidentally touch a lighted stove and burn our hand while working in the kitchen. Suppose we did not feel pain. What would it be like? It is because we can feel pain that we are able to retract our hand at once from the stove. Likewise, the pain and sorrow that we suffer in daily life is a reminder that “it’s time for a change!” Usually, we try to make external changes and this might give us a temporary reprieve from our sorrows. But if we wish to be free from sorrow once and for all, we must change our outlook and attitude radically.

A devotee used to visit a *mahatma* (spiritually illumined soul) regularly and complain about the problems in his life. One day, when he started complaining, the mahatma said, “Bring me a glass of

Instead of brooding over problems, engage yourself in creative work. Help others in whatever way possible. The heavy burden of sorrow will leave you.

water and a handful of salt.” When the man brought those items, the mahatma said, “Add half the salt into the water and stir well. Then drink the water and tell me how it tastes.”

The devotee did as told and said, “It is too salty for consumption!”

The mahatma then took him to a freshwater lake and said, “Drop the rest of the salt into this lake and then take a sip of the water.”


The devotee took a sip and said that the water was fresh and pure. The mahatma asked him, “Isn’t the water salty?”

The devotee replied, “Not at all!”

The mahatma then said, “Look, salt is like the sorrows of life, and fresh water, like our innate bliss. The water in the glass became undrinkable after you added just a little salt

to it. But the same amount of salt made no difference to the freshness of the lake water. At present, your mind is as narrow as the glass. If you make it as expansive as the lake and awaken your inner happiness, no sorrow can ever touch you.”

Happiness is our natural state. But when we give undue importance to matters that create sorrow, our mind becomes fixated on them and we helplessly undergo sorrow.

Let the birds of sorrow fly over your head but never allow them to build a nest on it. Instead of brooding over problems all the time, engage yourself in creative work. Help others in whatever way possible. The mind will then become expansive. The heavy burden of sorrow will leave you and you will experience the bliss of the Self. 

The Boat of Our Lives

by swamini
suidyamrita prana

Once, an experienced captain of a ship set out on a voyage after extensive preparation. He was proud of his abilities, and his arrogance was evident in his behaviour and attitude. Though this irritated his crew members, they had no choice but to obey his commands. The ship sailed as planned and the people aboard enjoyed their time on the sea.

One day, the weather suddenly changed. Dark rain-clouds filled the sky and the waters became turbulent. As the ship began listing dangerously,

the passengers began screaming. The captain shouted, "I'm here! Why are you afraid?" But when the ship began to lurch and sway alarmingly, the captain realized that matters were beyond his control. He looked up at the sky helplessly and joined his hands in prayer. He felt his vision clouding over and he fell unconscious.

After some time, the captain regained consciousness. There was complete silence. He looked around and saw that the ship was almost completely wrecked. No one other than him was on board. He screamed in desperation, but his cries were heard only by the sky and ocean waves. As he contemplated his earlier arrogance and his present helplessness, he was moved to prayer.

Suddenly, he heard a sound. When he opened his eyes, he saw a huge, white bird flying towards him. He realized that the ship must be near land. Summoning all his reserves of

energy, he dived into the ocean and swam. He followed the direction of the bird and finally reached ashore.

We are all like the captain in the story. We start the journey of life with all kinds of plans and dreams. But unexpected storms devastate our hopes, and we are left floundering on the rising and falling waves of our *prarab̄ha* (past karma). Not knowing how to move ahead, we surrender helplessly. That is when, like the white bird in the story, supreme consciousness appears before us in the form of the Guru to guide us to safety. If we have faith in Her and follow the path She shows us, divine grace will help us cross the ocean of transmigration (cycle of birth and death) and thus save us.

A gripping example of how the Lord saved a helpless soul can be seen in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Arjuna, who had been so proud of his abilities, suddenly became confused and began to

despair. He cried out, “O Lord! I am Your disciple and surrender to You. Please guide and instruct me” (2.7).

Lord Krishna’s response (in chapter 2) is the essence of the entire *Bhagavad Gita*. Among the gems of advice He gives Arjuna is the following:

*yoga-stbah kuru karmani
sangam tyaktva dhananjaya
siddhy-asiddhyoh samo
bbutva samatvam yoga
ucyate*

Be steadfast in yoga, O Arjuna. Perform your duty and abandon all attachment to success or failure. Such evenness of mind is called yoga.
(2.48)

Through this verse, Sri Krishna gives us a precise explanation of *karma yoga*, the path of dedicated action to God. Yoga is evenness of mind. It means freeing ourselves from the expectation of a particular outcome, remaining steady in the face of profit or loss,

success or failure, and doing all actions with detachment. Amma conveys the same idea when She says, “Children, live in the present moment and do your duty. The present moment alone is in our hands. Whatever may come our way, move forward with courage. Leave the rest to God’s will.”

In 2006, after Amma left for the US Tour, I received a message: Amma wanted me to manage the Hyderabad Amrita Vidyalayam (school). It felt as if I had been smacked behind the head. Amma normally sends people who know the local language to specific places. Everyone, not just me, was surprised when Amma wanted me to go to Hyderabad, as I do not know Telugu at all. All the same, I was happy that Amma thought of me. Later, She Herself instructed me on what exactly I was to do there and how I should conduct myself. I had faith that Amma would take care of everything.

At school, many problems would arise daily. Every morning, I would feel stressed anticipating the complaints and problems I would hear that day. But each problem would somehow be resolved, and I would be amazed. On reflection, there was only one explanation: Amma's grace was at work. She often tells us, "Children, don't stress yourself out. Try your best and leave the rest to God's will."

Actually, Amma can easily pay more qualified people to do much of the work the ashram does. What She is trying to do is not to create career professionals out of us. Amma is helping us gain an attitude of surrender. To do so, we must wholeheartedly try to do what Amma has deemed best for our spiritual progress.

Once, I took the school children to a fair and enjoyed watching them have fun on the Ferris wheel. However, one child in the group started screaming and crying to stop

the wheel. This wheel was controlled by a switch. Once we get in, we can get off only after the switch is turned off. Whether we enjoy the ride or scream in fear, the switch will turn off only as previously determined. Similarly, the Creator has predetermined the beginning, middle and end of the Ferris wheel of our life. There is only one thing we can do: set a goal and strive to attain it. We must remember that the higher our goal, the more obstacles we will face and the larger the obstacles will be.

The Ganges flows from the high peaks of the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. Is her journey easy? No. She glides over small pebbles, negotiates huge boulders, drifts through and around trees that have fallen in her path, and navigates her way through mountain ranges. Does she ever think, "I can't do this! I've had enough!" No, no such thoughts ever arise. She flows without wavering, always surging

We start the journey of life with all kinds of plans and dreams. But unexpected storms devastate our hopes, and we are left floundering on the rising and falling waves of our *prarabdha*. Not knowing what to do, we surrender helplessly. That is when supreme consciousness appears before us in the form of the Guru to guide us to safety.

ahead until she reaches her goal. We should also develop this firm determination and faith in our lives.

Such mental strength does not come easily to ordinary people, but it is the very nature of divine beings like Amma. Since childhood, She has had to face intense criticism from all quarters. Yet She remains unperturbed. It is mentioned in Amma's *Ashtottaram* (108 attributes) that Amma was silent when She emerged from Her mother's womb (mantra 24). That silence was an expression of Her inner equipoise. It is from this state of inner silence and balance that

She does everything. All of Amma's charities are expressions of wisdom born of this even-mindedness. Whether it is disaster management or clean-up projects, orphanages or hospitals, relief or research projects, Amma quietly steers everything with unerring wisdom. She takes credit for nothing, receives both applause and criticism with detachment, and continues Her mission of loving and serving others.

I heard about the following incident from Dr. Priya Nair. It took place after Amma was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the State University of New York in 2010. After the

award ceremony, Amma was taken to a room behind the stage. Priya was holding the ceremonial gown. Suddenly, Swami Amritaswarupananda took it from her, held it up to Amma, and excitedly said, “Dr. Amma! Dr. Amma! Amma has become a doctor!” Priya started clapping. But Amma put the robes aside and said, “What are you saying? I’m not interested in such titles! Amma does not do anything for awards. Today, people will applaud and tomorrow they might shout in criticism. What’s the point in getting affected by either? Amma has agreed to accept this award because it makes you and my other children happy. But if you become attached to such so-called successes, you will become miserable when people criticize you. Remain calm.”

What if we receive such an award? We would post photographs of ourselves on Facebook and try to get as many ‘likes’ as possible!

In fact, Amma demonstrates the entire *Bhagavad Gita* through Her life. She continues to follow Her dharma, disregarding both praise and insult, acceptance or rejection.

Amma has never cancelled darshans or tours, saying that She is tired. Even now, while the entire world is in lockdown, Amma remains as active as ever, actually even more so than before, as She reviews the affairs of each and every one of the branch ashrams all over the world.

I would like to share another incident, mentioned in Swami Ramakrishnananda’s book *Amritashtakam*. When Amma visited Japan in 2011, Japan was still recovering from the Tohoku earthquake. The people travelling with Amma had not wanted Her to go to Japan at all, and were relieved that the program venue was far from the earthquake’s epicentre. Many people from relief camps came for Amma’s darshan. Seeing their

expressions, which were laden with anxiety, fear and desperation, Amma summoned the brahmachari overseeing the Japanese program and said, “Tomorrow, I’m going to the epicentre to see my children there. Make the necessary arrangements!”

After a long journey, Amma reached the local relief camps, embraced the refugees, and spent time with them. All those who were with Her witnessed the courage and compassion of a true yogi. She then went to the nearby seashore and prayed for the souls of all those who had died and for harmony between humanity and nature. Such is Her equal vision and love for all beings. Amma somehow managed to reach the next city just before the program was slated to begin.

How is Amma able to do all this? She exists in a state beyond the body, mind and intellect, but comes down to our level in order to guide us. The scriptures state that we must

learn and follow the examples of spiritual masters.

We can learn the following from Amma. These are the factors that transform karma into karma yoga:

1. Enjoy all the actions we perform.
2. Give more importance to the effort than to the result of actions.
3. Remain detached from the results of action. Do not become elated by success or dejected by failure. Accept everything as *prasad*, a gift from God. This is surrender.

When we see a half-filled glass, we could say that it is half full or half empty. Which is correct? The truth is that the glass is half water and half emptiness. Likewise, we must see everything for what it is.

Once, when Amma was returning to Her room after darshan, a devotee offered Her three yellow roses from her

garden. Amma looked at the flowers for a few moments, enjoyed their fragrance, and then said with a smile, “The shape and petals of these roses are so different, and yet, each one is so beautiful.” After a few moments of silence, Amma continued, “You know, when I look at the world, I see everything like these flowers: so different, yet so exquisitely beautiful! Each and every one of you, every person that comes for darshan, each person who passes by, is so different yet so divinely beautiful. If only you could see the world the way I do...”

We cannot even begin to imagine what this state is like. Amma is that rare soul who beholds only beauty. From that rarefied position, whom could we hate? How could we be sad when there is only beauty? There would be nothing negative, only a constant flow of positive energy. There will only be love and compassion for all. Amma sings:

*taye! nin
makkalanennuracchal
loka vairuddhyam
snehamakum...
dharmam engum anandam
ekum* (from ‘Shakti
Rupe’)

O Mother, if one looks upon all as Your children, the contradictions of the world will be transformed into love, and righteousness will spread joy everywhere!

Earlier in this article, life was compared to a ship on a mighty ocean. Let us have the faith that the boats of our lives are sailing on Amma’s ocean of bliss. Then, no matter how strong the hurricanes or storms may be, there will be nothing to fear. We need never be anxious about the future either.

Let us live without fear, filled only with the prayer, “Never let me stray from you!” May Amma fulfil this prayer.





“Come
and
get it!”

by aruna
binuraj, u.s.a.

Chant the *Lalita Sabasranama*¹ in Amma’s holy presence,” my mind whispered.

Amma was in San Ramon, California, for Her US Summer Tour. I took out my archana² book, closed my eyes, and began reciting the *dhyaana shloka* (benedictory verse): “*Om sinduraruna vighrahm trinayanam...*”

1 The 1,000 names of the Divine Mother.

2 Archana refers to the practice of praising God by chanting or reciting a list of names associated with a particular divinity.

Then, taking a deep breath, I earnestly began chanting the 1,000 names of the Divine Mother. Perched comfortably on the balcony, I had a bird's-eye view of Amma and the activities around Her. Her radiant form the cynosure of all eyes. The melodious bhajans being sung by the swamis resounded in the background. Children ran about gaily. Many people were walking around, smiling, chatting, singing, dancing or engaged in various *seva* (volunteer) activities. Some were meditating. Even as I was aware of the ceaseless peripheral activity, I did not take my eyes off the archana book while chanting.

I first met Amma in Amritapuri as a teenager in December 1994. I still remember how tears flowed incessantly as I gazed upon Amma's divine form as She was giving darshan in the Kali Temple. It was as if an invisible hand had gently touched my heart. A

huge sense of relief and solace washed over me. My breath seemed to flow naturally for the first time. Instinctively, I knew I had reached where I needed to be. Awkwardly sitting on the floor, patiently awaiting my turn for darshan, I tried in vain to control my tears. Embarrassed, I hid my face and kept wiping the warm tears streaming down my face for a good hour or more. It seemed like a sacred baptism of sorts.

Although I considered myself a devout Hindu who frequented temples, I had led a mostly materialistic life. After that fortuitous meeting with Amma, I happily immersed myself in the pure and palpable spiritual essence that She embodied. I was fortunate to receive a mantra from Amma during my very first Devi Bhava darshan. Thereafter, I began to attend the weekly pujas, talks and the chanting of the *Lalita Sabasranama* at Amma's local ashram branch

in Ernakulam. At home, I began a daily spiritual routine. My mother, siblings and I chanted Amma's *Ashtottaram* (108 attributes) and sang simple Amma bhajans at dusk in our modest puja space. Amma became the beacon of hope and joy in our lives.

Although I enjoyed singing bhajans and chanting my mantra, I lacked the resolve to chant the *Lalita Sabasranama* regularly. Initially, I felt it was tedious and time consuming, and many of the mantras were difficult to pronounce. As I had to slowly and carefully enunciate the mantras, I resented not being able to close my eyes to meditate upon Amma's form. However, I also knew that Amma gives great importance to the chanting of the *Lalita Sabasranama*. Why else would the ashram start the day with the chanting of Amma's *Ashtottaram* and the *Lalita Sabasranama*? Surely, the chanting is some sort of spiritual activation key.

Nevertheless, the irregularities in my *Lalita Sabasranama* persisted for a long time.

As the years rolled by, I married and settled down in the USA. Here, I took up the daily chanting of the *Lalita Ashtottaram*, the 108 names of Goddess Lalita. They are short, sweet and easy to memorize. At the time, I also noticed that Amma led the chanting of the *Lalita Ashtottaram* during the Atma Puja, just before Devi Bhava. I took this as confirmation that the thousand names were "not really necessary," and settled comfortably into this spiritual routine. But during Amma's next visit to San Ramon, I was surprised to find that Amma's Atma Puja routine now featured the *Lalita Trishati* (300 names of the Divine Mother) instead of the *Lalita Ashtottaram*. I felt that Amma was subtly encouraging me to chant more names of the Divine. So, I switched to the daily chanting of the *Lalita*

Trishati instead of the *Lalita Ashottaram*.

But on this particular day during Amma's San Ramon tour, I was attempting the *Lalita Sabasranama*, all 1,000 names. After what seemed like a superhuman effort, the chanting finally ended! Even as I felt triumphant, I was also aware of a gnawing hunger. Lifting my eyes from the archana book, I eagerly looked down at Amma. She was eating *parippuvada*, a fried and crispy delicacy made from lentils. A devotee had made it as an offering for Amma. I love *parippuvada*! Perhaps due to my hunger, the thought urgently flashed in my mind: "I also want *parippuvada*!"

Almost immediately, Amma looked up straight at me and held up the *parippuvada*, as if to say, "Come and get it!" Then She turned to the man behind Her and spoke to him, showing the *parippuvada* and motioning to me. The man smiled, took the *parippuvada* from

Amma, looked up, and nodded at me. The people near me looked perplexed, but I knew that Amma had read my thoughts! Gleefully, I jumped up and raced down to where Amma was, to collect my divinely gifted *parippuvada*. Strangely, my hunger had disappeared and was replaced by pure joy. I found that it was not necessary to eat the entire *parippuvada* by myself. Happily, I broke off tiny bits of it, as Amma's *prasad*, and shared it with many devotees, including those who had been sitting near me in the balcony.

This experience reminded me of the potency of the *Lalita Sabasranama*. Amma has said, "Devi will always protect those who chant the *Lalita Sabasranama* with devotion every day. They will never face a shortage of food and basic necessities, and will also gain spiritual growth." With heartfelt prayers of gratitude to Amma, I have since upgraded my daily spiritual

“Devi will always protect those who chant the *Lalita Sahasranama* with devotion every day. They will never face a shortage of food and basic necessities, and will also gain spiritual growth.”

routine to include the 1,000 names, instead of the shorter versions.

Once, I was going through an existential crisis. I felt out of place and was frustrated that I did not fit into either the material or the spiritual world. My mental struggles persisted for a few days. Finally, to take my mind off my troubles, I called my mother, who was living in Amritapuri then. After the usual pleasantries, my mother suddenly laughed and said, “You know, Amma said something very odd today in between bhajans. She randomly said, *Kovarkazhutaye poley irikkandenkil archana cheyyu!*”

I was stunned. Translated, it means, “If you don’t want to

be like a mule, do your archana.” The mule, an odd hybrid, is neither a horse nor a donkey. Amma’s idiomatic expression summed up my existential conundrum. Though thousands of miles away in Amritapuri, Amma had not only understood my mental state but also provided the remedy. I mentally prostrated to Amma and doubled down on my *Lalita Sahaasranama* archana practice.

Amma says, “The *Lalita Sahaasranama* archana brings prosperity to the family and peace to the world. It will remove the effects of past mistakes. We will get the strength to understand the Truth and live according to it. We will get long life and wealth. The

atmosphere also will get purified.”

I have learned from personal experience that the *Lalita Sabasranama* is indeed a spiritual activation key that makes all the other spiritual practices whole and complete. It removes obstacles and resolves problems that we may encounter, and accelerates our material and spiritual progress. Whenever I neglect my morning archana, I often find that I lack orientation, and the day evolves chaotically, both at work and home. But when I begin the day with archana,

things change magically. My mind becomes calmer, and life becomes manageable.

By Amma’s grace, the *Lalita Sabasranama* archana has now become a mainstay in my family’s spiritual practices. Even during these times of the COVID-19 pandemic, Amma’s devotees worldwide are doing the *Lalita Sabaranama* archana for the peace and well-being of the world.

May Amma guide us to the shores of infinite love, peace, prosperity, and everlasting joy.



(continued from page 24)

the clouds of desire and attachment. Therefore, uttarayana refers to the heart-space that is free of the clouds of desire.

We can also interpret these images to mean that we must engage in virtuous action until the last moment, entertain only noble thoughts,

cultivate a luminous intellect, and nurture a heart that is pure and devoid of attachment. To die in this state is the greatest blessing. To gain this blessing, we must diligently perform spiritual austerities our whole life.

(to be continued)



Chapter 8: Yoga of the Imperishable Brahman

by Prof. V. Muraleedhara Menon, India

Human life is a mélange of diverse experiences, a lengthy array of actions. All these actions make impressions on the mind. Some impressions are positive, and some, negative. Just because we do not remember past lives

does not mean that we did not have them. Even in this life, we remember only certain incidents. Does this mean that other events did not take place? Though we do not remember them, they nevertheless left impressions on the mind. The impression made by other events might be stronger, and hence, we remember them.

When we try to recall all that we did in a day, only the important events will come to mind. If we try to recall what we did in a week, we might not recollect all the events we could previously remember having done in one day. Similarly, looking back over a month, we will find many more memories have slipped away. If we cast our mind back to what we did in the last six months or a year, we will recall only key events. We would have forgotten the rest.

Though we have done countless actions and amassed much information, all these

thoughts and actions disappear into a fog of forgetfulness after leaving their impressions on the mind. Over time, from numberless impressions, a few strong ones remain. At the end of our lives, we can recall just a handful. What this means is that all that we did and learnt over the course of a lifetime can be reduced to just a few indelible impressions. Does it mean that much of life was in vain?

No. Just as the balance sheet of a businessman who has toiled for years shows the net profit and loss, the final analysis of our life's transactions will, at a glance, reveal if we have made a profit or suffered a loss. If it is a profit, we will be happy; otherwise, we will feel sad.

There are proper fractions in mathematics (where the numerator is smaller than the denominator). When rounded off to the closest integer, what remains is one or zero. Similarly, after distilling the

diverse impressions of a lifetime, what remains is an essential impression. This is also the answer to the puzzle of life. What we think about at the very end is the irreducible essence of our life. Hence, all our efforts must be aimed at ensuring that the end is sweet. All that we do throughout life must be directed to ensuring that the impression we want to be stronger than all others prevails at the time of our passing.

In this chapter, the Lord reveals that what we think of at the time of death will determine the nature of our next birth. We set out for the next life with the provisions made in this. The journey continues after the sleep of death.

We should never forget death. Only then can we free ourselves from the fear of death. Would we dare to sin if we are facing the ferocious lion of death, standing before us with its maws wide open? The remembrance of death is

also necessary for liberation from sin. But poor man, the moment he hears about death, he collapses in fear. He cannot bear even the thought of death. But death is inevitable. One's return ticket is booked, as it were, the very moment one is born. Whether or not we think about death, we will die. Every time the sun sets, our life inches a little closer to death. Yet people remain careless and unconcerned. Seeing this, the great sage from Maharashtra, Jnaneshwar, expressed wonder. We are always in a hurry to forget death. But no matter how hard we try to fool it, death will capture us in the end.

Knowing that death awaits us, we must strive to make that moment blessed and sacred. If death is to be auspicious, the mind must be pure. To purify it, we must do good deeds. We must take pains to ensure that all our actions are harmless. We must correct our mistakes and make sure

that we do not repeat them. We must ceaselessly engage in self-appraisal. Each one of our actions must be aimed at carving out a beautiful sculpture of life. The dreams we see also deserve our attention. Bad dreams are the surfacing of negative impressions slumbering in the depths of our subconscious. This means that we must remain alert at all times.

The eyes, ears and tongue must see, hear and speak only good things. The mind must continue cultivating a succession of noble thoughts. The inner remembrance of God should become ever clearer. Thus, an unbroken stream of auspicious impressions must flow and sanctify our whole life.

If we follow our *svadharmā* (duty suited to one's nature) and remember God, all the gods will shower their blessings on us at the time of death. The Lord says this figuratively: if one dies when the

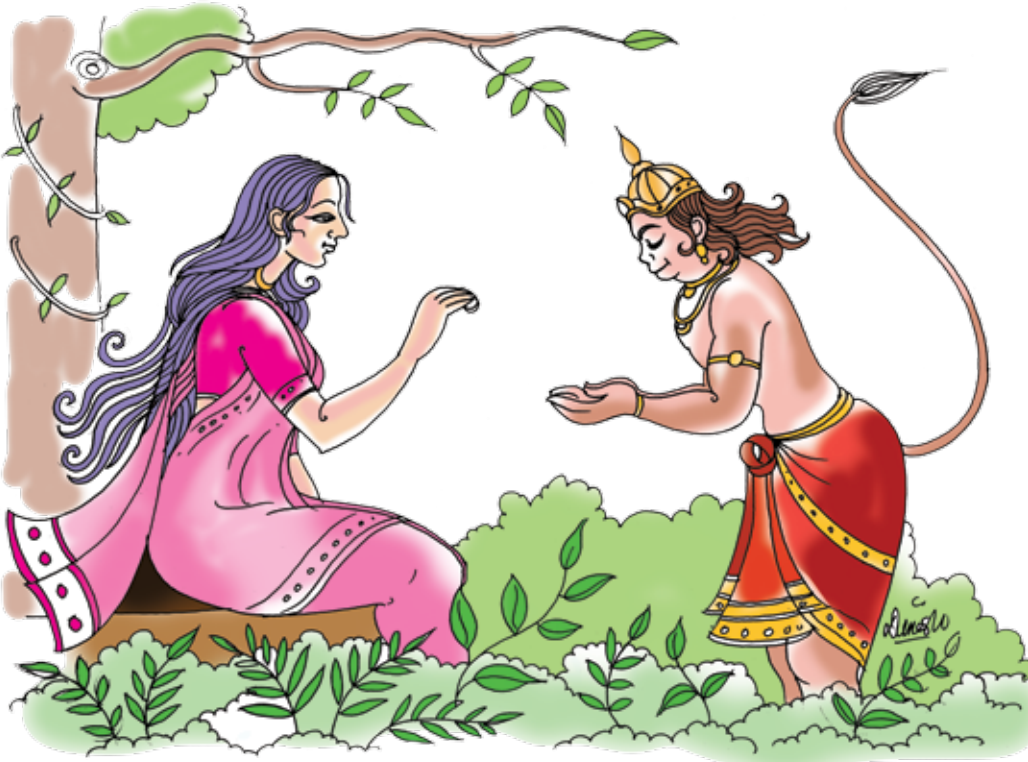
moon is waxing, and the sun is shining and moving on a northward course (*uttarayana*) through a cloudless sky, one merges in Brahman, the Supreme. But if one dies during the smoky and waning phase of the moon when the sun is moving southwards through a dark and cloudy sky, one will fall again into the vicious cycle of birth and death.

Many have not really understood this. What it means essentially is that one needs the grace and blessings of the sun, moon, fire and other gods. Here, fire represents action, the sun represents the brilliance of the radiant intellect, and the moon represents the pure thoughts and feelings of a lofty mind. The waxing moon (of the bright lunar fortnight) refers to loving devotion, grace and compassion. The grace of the sky means a pure heart devoid of

(continued on page 20)

Saga of Sita

by anushree (rondine twist), belize



The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are India's epic poems, and the sagas reveal the immensely creative and spiritually grounded history and imagination of the Indian people. The authors — Valmiki of the *Ramayana*

and Veda Vyasa of the *Mahabharata* — were themselves characters in the epics, lending credibility to their testimony of historical events. The two epics are also called *mahakavyas*, great poems. For the poets of ancient India, the aim of *kavya* (poetry) was to transport the readers away from the mundane world, to make them forget temporarily their limited existence, and to experience divinity. Both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* do so masterfully. They are written in beautiful poetic language, they interweave numerous storylines — of beloved heroes, cunning villains, complex relationships, and intriguing twists and turns — and they transport readers to fascinating historical eras with powerful dynasties in the midst of monumental power plays. By delving deeply into the epics, readers can find an array of interwoven spiritual messages. Amma has explained many hidden spiritual

messages found in these two epics, and She does so in ways that make it easy to apply these lessons in one's own life.

This essay considers Sita, one of the main characters in the *Ramayana*, and highlights some of the important spiritual lessons that Amma has explained about Sita's saga, lessons that remain relevant today.

The *Ramayana* stresses the importance of moral conduct. Its main characters, Sri Rama and his wife Sita, were the perfect man and woman who respected the norms and ideals of their time. Sri Rama's father, King Dasharatha, had promised his second wife Kaikeyi two boons, which she misused in a ploy to make her son Bharata successor to the king, even though Bharata himself and everyone else accepted that Rama, the eldest prince who was loved by all, was the rightful heir to the throne. To ensure that his father would not default on his promise to

Kaikeyi and thus tarnish his good name, Rama willingly exiled himself to 14 years of ascetic life in the forest. Sita and Rama's younger brother Lakshmana insisted on accompanying Him, leaving behind the luxuries of the palace. Keeping one's word was a virtue in Rama's lineage, the Sun Dynasty. The sacrifices His forebears underwent exemplified the importance of maintaining such values to hold society together. Likewise, the virtuous Sita and Lakshmana insisted on performing their duties as wife and brother respectively.

The *Ramayana* celebrates the victory of good over evil. During their exile, Sri Rama, Lakshmana and Sita overcame all obstacles, and the brothers defeated many demons, making the forest safe. Their greatest victory was the defeat of Ravana, who had kidnapped Sita. Rama's mission as a divine incarnation was to defeat Ravana, and that was the

underlying reason behind His exile. The defeat of Ravana marked the end of the 14 years of exile, and the trio returned to their kingdom, Ayodhya, where Rama was crowned king.

The saga does not end there. Some common folk in Ayodhya questioned Sita's purity as She had spent 10 months as Ravana's captive. Even though She had undergone an *Agni Pariksha*, a test of fire to prove Her chastity, Rama exiled Sita to Sage Valmiki's ashram to appease His subjects. Amma explains Sita's exile as part of the inquiry or investigation that a good leader must launch when complaints arise. She said that the exile was not meant to be permanent; Rama hoped to bring Sita back to Ayodhya eventually.

Accustomed to a life of luxuries, Sita willingly endured all kinds of hardships when She accompanied Rama during His exile, only to be exiled from Him shortly after

their reunion. What a tragic outcome, one may think. Amma says that Sri Rama's treatment of Sita should not be condemned without deeper spiritual reflection.

As Amma explains, Rama was doing His duty as king. According to *raja-dharma*, the duty of kings, Rama was first among citizens, not above them. He did not rule according to His own preferences but according to the will of his people. Impartial, Rama did not show any preference for His own family. As king, Rama's duty was to listen to His subjects. If they doubted the queen's chastity, how could they respect His leadership? After all, even though He was a king, Rama was merely a servant of the people of Ayodhya.

Amma explains that sending Sita away was a sacrifice made for the nation's welfare. She quotes the *Mahabharata* to illustrate this point: "To save a family, sacrifice a man; to

save a village, sacrifice a family; to save a country, sacrifice a village." The well-being of the entire kingdom was Rama's top consideration. "When one is the king of a nation, he cannot think only of his family's well-being," Amma says. "Suppose a war breaks out between two countries. A general should not remain at home with his family but be at the war front, leading his army. This is a general's dharma towards the nation."

Amma says that Rama knew that Sita was pure, and Sita also knew Rama's heart. There was no conflict between the two of them. Sita knew Rama as the *paramatma*, the Supreme Self, who dwelt in Her. Rama was distraught by Sita's absence. He remained loyal and never took a second wife. Even when a wife was needed to conduct religious ceremonies, Rama installed a golden idol of Sita as proxy.

The Malayalam movie, '*Kanchana Sita*' ('Golden Sita'),

adapted from C.N. Sreekan-
tan Nair's version of the *Rama-
yana*, depicts Rama wandering
through the forest in an ago-
nizing search for Sita. He fi-
nally takes his own life by
wading into the Ganges River,
which was symbolic of his
merger with Sita, who is treat-
ed in the movie as one with the
forces of nature. The uncon-
ventional depiction of *Rama-
yana* shows the consequences
of Rama's exiling of Sita. But
in reality, in the original *Rama-
yana*, Sita was not lost, roam-
ing in the forest somewhere;
She was living in Sage Val-
miki's ashram, which was
similar to the custom of going
to the wife's maternal home for
her first childbirth. Moreover,
Amma says the ashram was a
holy and conducive atmos-
phere for Sita to give birth and
raise Her twins with all the
right values for the young
princes. Rama even ensured
that Bharata was present at
the ashram when Sita gave
birth.


Amma reminds us of the
chain of events that led to
Sita's captivity and exile. It
was Her desire for the golden
deer that led to Her being
abducted in the first place.
Ravana had sent the demon
Maricha disguised as a golden
deer to distract Rama so that
he could kidnap Sita. Rama
knew there was something
unnatural about the deer, but
Sita's desire was so strong
that She compelled Rama to
set off in search of it. When
Maricha cried out in Rama's
voice, She insisted that Lak-
shmana go in search of Rama,
and She was tricked by Ra-
vana into crossing the *Laksh-
mana-rekha* (boundary line)
that protected Her. Amma
explains that such desires and
lack of discipline distance us
from God. "If desires become
strong, we fall into a trap.
Only discipline can save us."
Sita's desire crossed the limits
of discipline, and as a result,
She fell into the hands of Ra-
vana.

During Her captivity in Lanka, Sita lived outside in a grove of Ashoka trees, steadfastly rejecting Ravana's advances and refusing a life of luxury in his palace. She spent every moment uttering the name of Rama and meditating on Him. But because of Her sincere prayers, Sri Rama rescued Her. The entire episode happened so that Rama could defeat Ravana. Sita's prayers played a big role in Rama's victory. Amma says "When we awaken to our ignorance and put in conscious effort, God reaches out to us and we are able to unite with Him."

Sita's saga is rich in spiritual messages. Her desire for the golden deer shows how blindly following desires comes at a great price. Sometimes, the golden deer is a trap. But even then, if we earnestly call out to God, God will save us, like Rama saved Sita.

Let us be thankful for *ma-batmas* (spiritually illumined

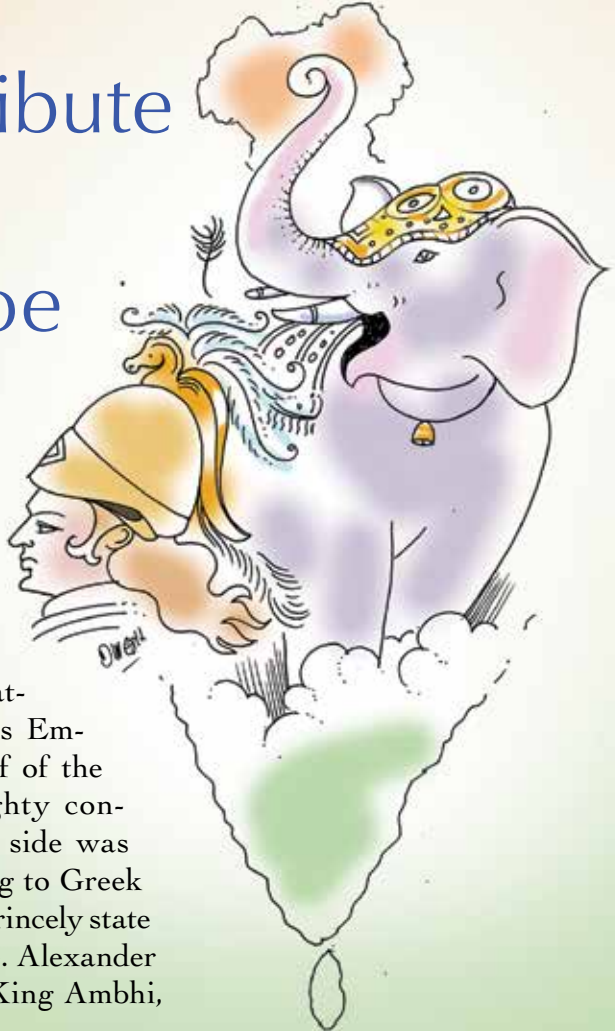
souls) like Amma who unveil the spiritual gems hidden in the great epics. Through Her interpretations, we can understand how these epics shed light on our own actions, and how God operates in our lives. All the circumstances in the *Ramayana* led to Rama defeating Ravana and rescuing Sita. Likewise, even though there may be times of difficulty in our lives, by invoking the help of God, we can also emerge victorious in the end. We must remember that desires must not override discipline. Nonetheless, even when we err, the Lord will hear our sincere prayers and rescue us. Should we ever feel abandoned and separate from the Lord, we should remember Sita, who accepted a second exile, knowing that the Lord was always with Her.

Thus, the *Ramayana* truly serves the purpose of a mahakavya by transporting us into the presence of God. 

Greek Tribute to Her Indian Foe

by br. rupesh, india

Deployed on both banks of River Jhelum, the two armies began their final preparations for the attack. On one side was Emperor Alexander, chief of the Greek army and mighty conqueror. On the other side was Puru (Porus, according to Greek records), who ruled a princely state in the Punjab province. Alexander entreated the help of King Ambhi,



then ruler of Taxila, who agreed to help the emperor. If Puru was defeated, Ambhi would be allowed to rule Puru's small state, under the domain of the Greek Emperor.

Backed by his massive military might and Ambhi's support, Alexander began daydreaming of the day he would be able to extend his reign over the whole of India after defeating Puru and conquering the Magadh Empire across the Ganges.

Alexander had conquered three-quarters of the known world within a decade and earned the distinction of being invincible in war. During his reign, he had conquered many kingdoms, and the defeated rulers had agreed to pay him heavy tributes. By BCE 326, he reached the borders of India, which Greek philosophers and travellers had extolled as paradise on earth.

Any opponent would have thought twice before

confronting such a mighty warrior. But Puru, who hailed from the Pauravas dynasty, was no coward. Though he knew only too well that his army was no match for the extensive fighting forces of his adversary, Puru sent Alexander's messenger back, saying that he was not ready to sign any peace agreement with the invader.

In a strategic move, later hailed as one of Alexander's master strokes, the emperor moved his army on rafts under the cover of darkness across the river and launched offensive operations. Thus began what came to be known later as the Battle of the Hydaspes. The Greek forces had anticipated an easy victory, but what they faced proved to be unexpected: massive tuskers wearing iron shields on their heads, arrows shot from formidable eight-foot bows, and poisoned spears. A fierce fight followed.

Puru was eventually defeated, but he was able to inflict heavy casualties in men and equipment in the Greek army. Alexander's steed, Bucephalus, who had served the emperor from Greece to India, was mortally wounded.

Alexander ordered King Puru to be brought before him. Though defeated, Puru, who was more than seven feet tall, radiated immense self-confidence, even as he was brought chained before the emperor. Seeing how proud he looked, Alexander asked Puru, "How should I deal with you?"

"As one king treats another," replied Puru, without the slightest trepidation.

Impressed by his prisoner's fearlessness, Alexander is said to have returned the kingdom to Puru.

After the war of Hydaspes, Alexander gave up his dream of conquering India. Historians cite four reasons for this decision. One was the heavy

losses his army suffered after the confrontation with Puru's army. Secondly, he thought that if the tiny state that Puru ruled could put up such strong resistance to his invasion, overcoming the powerful Magadh empire across the Ganga would be near impossible. Thirdly, Alexander's forces, who had been continuously engaged in warring activity for more than a decade, were suffering from fatigue. Fourthly, the soldiers refused to fight more wars, especially after the war with Puru, who had given their self-esteem a severe bruising.

We know this story from the records of Greek historians like Arrian. Unfortunately, there are no references to Alexander or Puru in Indian history or the Puranas. Perhaps, existing records were destroyed during the successive invasions of India.

Some historians see the confrontation between Alexander and Puru in a different

light. For instance, during his visit to India in 1957, the then Russian Defence Minister, Marshal Georgy Zhukov, addressed a gathering of Indian military leaders and historians and asked, "Did Alexander really win the Battle of Hydaspes?"

The Marshal's question was not without merit. Firstly, historians who lived under the patronage of kings were likely to praise their rulers. If Alexander had been defeated, the Greek writers would not have been permitted to report events truthfully.

Secondly, there was no precedent of Alexander voluntarily returning the land he conquered. Not only that, he used to mercilessly kill many of the kings he defeated.

Thirdly, according to the agreement, Alexander was expected to give Puru's kingdom to Ambhi. Returning the land to Puru would have been a violation of this deal and a betrayal.

Fourthly, the Greek forces would not have been under any pressure to give up because of fatigue, for there was a constant turnover and replenishment of the forces. After each war, fresh contingents from Greece would replace the forces that had been fighting. Not only that, who would have dared to tell the formidable Alexander that he was tired of war?

In the absence of Indian historical records, we have no option but to accept the foreign narrative. Even so, there are other ways of looking at this historical episode.

Suppose Puru was defeated in the battle. Given that his heroic acts and chivalry were praised by his enemies nonetheless, was that not a victory for him? If the Greeks were prevented from entering and looting India and forced to return, was not Puru truly invincible? Such was the mettle of leaders like Puru. 🌸



Ark of Bhajans

by Kamala Joy, U.S.A.

I'm writing this in late July, 2020. Amritapuri has been closed to visitors since late March. There are more than 3,000 residents and international visitors here. As Amma is not travelling, She comes to the main hall seven days a week. Most days, from 5 p.m. to 8:30 or 9 p.m., She leads the white flower meditation, after which a swami(ni) or brahmachari(ni) gives

a spiritual discourse in Her presence, before She leads bhajans. On Tuesdays, Amma serves prasad lunch, and bhajans start at about 6:30 p.m.

International devotees have been composing bhajans. For the past few months, one of them has been leading a bhajan with Amma almost every evening. I have composed a few bhajans and songs over the years. What happens when I'm writing is that I'm intensely focused on the words and melody for several days or even weeks, trying out different wordings and rhymes, leaving meals abruptly to write down an idea, walking around humming it to myself, musing in Amma's presence, sometimes spending an entire meditation session thinking about the bhajan. What a gift! Amma knows that the composers will be engaged in contemplation of the divine for days on end in order to complete their bhajan. And by performing with the composer, She is

sending the undeniable message that we have something worthwhile to contribute.

In the last few months, Amma has recorded bhajans in non-Indian languages such as Arabic, Basque, Catalan, Chinese, Creole, Danish, Dutch, English, Farsi, Finnish, French, Gaelic, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili and Swedish. This is such a gift to the world.

It was during the Arabic bhajan that it came to me: Amma is having us build an ark of songs to sail into a better future.


Since the lockdown began, we have been strictly confined to the ashram premises. Same rooms, same food, same sights, same schedule, same people. Many of us are used to demanding schedules and jobs. Having so much less to do than normal can be difficult, especially in the context of all the suffering and uncertainty in

the world right now. So, on any given day, some of us feel restless, depressed or anxious. This is natural, of course. Mother is taking great care to keep us inspired and busy. One of the many ways She's doing this is through bhajans.

Those of us lucky enough to be here are well aware of the profound blessing it is and marvel at this daily. One evening, when Amma sang a Chinese bhajan, I felt moved and wept. The woman who wrote the bhajan came to Amritapuri after reading a Chinese blog. She had never met Amma before coming here. At times during these months, she has resisted ashram life. But one day, she came from her room when Amma was about to finish serving prasad lunch. Amma caught her eye and asked her if she was doing okay. The brief exchange had a profound impact on her, and the bhajan is part of it.

Very recently, China and India were close to war over

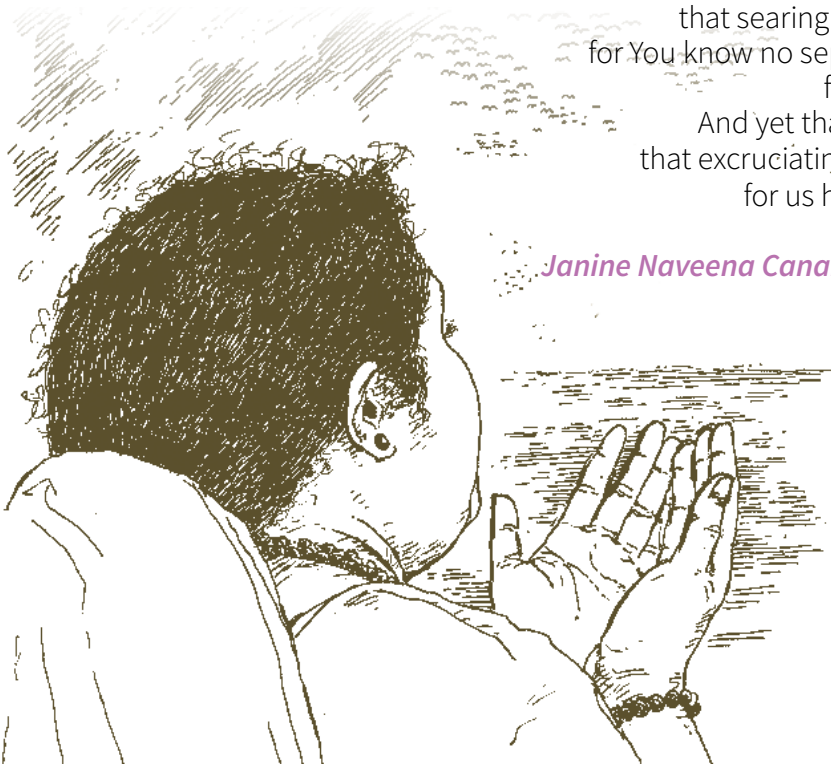
disputed territory near Tibet, which contains the headwaters of a river that supplies vital water to India, China, and Pakistan. But Amma, a Guru from India, was singing a beautiful song in Chinese with a Chinese devotee. Imagine this bhajan playing from someone's home in China. Anyone walking by would have the blessing of hearing Amma's voice in their native language. This bhajan could result in more Chinese people meeting Amma and then carrying Her blessing to others. The potential impact in terms of peace and harmony between people is incalculable.

I think of these new bhajans as little boats of peace and hope setting out to sail the world on the winds of Amma's breath. As a set, they form a huge ship, or ark, carrying all our love, hopes, gratitude and insights throughout the world. Amma made sure that we built it together. 

The Cry

I heard You singing across the cosmos
to Kali the Great One, your voice —
can it even be called a voice? — rising,
scorching, incinerating the night.
All the agony of human experience
You poured in supplication.
What were You pleading for, crying for,
demanding on our behalf — some grace
to save us from sinking
under the rim of Creation forever?
Only you knew.
From the heart of divinity rose
that searing sound —
for You know no separation
from Her.
And yet that agony,
that excruciating caring
for us here. 🌸

Janine Naveena Canan, U.S.A.



Lilas Around Amma

Universal Lottery

Being with a *mabatma* (spiritually illumined soul) is like winning the universal lottery. Amma's children have won the biggest jackpot, though we may not always see this. It takes divine grace for us to recognize and realize the value of Her presence and the time She lovingly spends with us.

2011 — Amma's November visit to San Ramon and Detroit was fast approaching. It was a special time for me because I was born in Detroit and living in the



San Ramon ashram. I was saving money to return to Amritapuri. With my daily wages as a special education teacher, I doubted if I could afford the trip to Detroit. It was Thanksgiving week and ticket prices were at a record high. I prayed to Amma, "What should I do?" Just then, a devotee came up and asked, "You're going to Detroit, aren't you?"

"I don't know. I don't think I can afford it."

"But isn't that where you're from? You've family there, too, right? Don't worry! Amma will find a way."

Since this came directly after my prayer, I took it as a sign from Amma. That night, I spent two hours obsessively searching for flights and eventually found a red-eye (late night), direct flight from San Francisco to Detroit for a reasonable price. As it was the cheapest ticket, I booked it.

The next day, I met another devotee, who asked if I

was going to Detroit. I said yes. He then asked, "Are you going to fly with Amma?" I did not even know that was a possibility. I said no, but the seed of desire was planted in my heart. "Wouldn't it be amazing to travel with Amma?" I thought.

When I was a child, I had heard stories of a mahatma who travelled from village to village, sharing His messages of love and wisdom. Some people were so inspired that they dropped everything to follow Him. I would imagine a caravan of vehicles traveling from place to place with the mahatma. I used to imagine being part of the group. I decided that if a mahatma ever came to earth, I would do the same, dropping everything to follow, no matter what. It was an innocent dream, as I thought mahatmas only lived in ancient times.

Amma's San Ramon programs unfolded beautifully

and it was time to fly to Detroit. As I was part of the tour staff, I went to check the postings on transportation to the airport. My name was in the last group. Looking at the names, I saw that the other members of the group were those who travel with Amma around the world. My heart skipped a beat. *What was going on?*

When I reached the airport, I learnt that my flight was two hours after Amma's: same airline, same route, same gate, but different time. I approached the ticket counter to ask if I could change my ticket to two hours earlier. The officer I spoke to said that there was an opening, and the change fee was \$950. There was no way I could afford that. It would be reckless, and I doubted if Amma would approve.

I was happy enough to be there. As I was in no hurry, I waited for Amma to arrive at the airport. Until then, I had

only seen Her during tour programs or in Amritapuri. And now, here I was with Amma in a completely public space, surrounded by strangers, advertisements on TV, security checkpoints... Amazingly, it did not feel worldly. It felt like yet another Amma program, with the staff doing *seva* (selfless service).

I went through the security checkpoint and also saw Amma going through security just like everyone else. She spent some time with everyone at the gates. I felt so blessed to be there. But all good things must come to an end. Boarding started for Amma's flight. I thought of all the people who have not received this opportunity. I knew that in the future, others would hear about Amma and Her life, and wished that they had been blessed with the opportunity to travel with Amma.

Suddenly, I began to feel regret. "I blew it! I had an

opportunity to fly with Amma, and I said no? Being with Her is priceless. Amma, I'd pay anything to be with You!"


Right before She boarded the flight, Amma turned and looked right at me. She held up Her hands in a gesture that seemed to say, "What are you doing?" I stared at Her, confused. She shook Her hands to reiterate. I then heard a voice inside me say loud and clear, "Aren't you coming?"

I ran to the boarding counter, handed my ticket to the agent and said, "Get me on that flight!"

"I'm sorry sir but it's not possi..." He stopped. It seemed as if an impulse of

energy had shot down from above and struck him dumb. He turned to the computer and started typing. He printed a ticket, handed it to me and said, "Your luggage will still arrive on the next flight."

I asked about the change fee. He said there was none.

With ticket in hand and my heart overflowing with gratitude, I proceeded to board Amma's flight. Thus, by Her grace, a childhood dream was fulfilled. May we all be blessed with innocence, faith and the good fortune of being with Her forever. May we all merge into Her divine feet. 

— *Sadanand*
(*Timothy Fillion*), USA

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